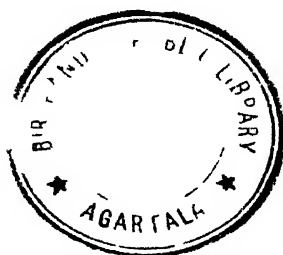


FOUR DAYS

Four Days

by John Buell



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1 : Saturday

The boy stopped

for the traffic light and eased the bicycle to the curb where he held it, with one foot on the sidewalk and one leg over the seat. He was short for his age, which was twelve, and he had to keep the bicycle upright. He was glad the light was against him; it had taken a lot of muscle to move up the sloping street to this corner, and he wanted to rest without seeming to give up. With one hand he adjusted the week-end newspapers in the front basket, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and leaned back on his standing leg to watch the traffic.

Cars kept piling up three abreast, with a clear lane for buses, and the line disappeared around a slow curve looking as if it could go on forever. In front they pushed against the light like angry bulldozers, and the ones behind made false starts. A bus ground its way between the curb and the cars, but it didn't get to the light. A green convertible

Four Days

pulled out ahead of it; it stopped next to the boy and honked. Drivers trumpeted their horns in protest and the bus edged in threatening with its air-brakes.

"Hey, kid! Gimme one of them papers."

The man in the convertible was waving a hand impatiently over the passenger's door and indicating the fifteen cents he held. He frowned at the boy.

"Snap it up, kid, you heard me."

The boy did nothing more than look at him and prepare to pull the bicycle up on the sidewalk. His face didn't change, it stayed serious, dull-eyed, as if he hadn't heard—it was the way to meet questions—a factless look from a lean half-tanned face under a bleaching crew-cut. He thought of a standard remark, but didn't say it; he had been told not to attract attention.

The man jerked his balding head angrily as he barked out his words once more. The other light turned yellow.

"They're deliveries. All sold."

The light turned green, the lines began moving and horns honked at the convertible as a parting comment.

"Come on, goddammit, you can get another one at any stand."

"So can you, mister."

The bus issued sharply decisive beeps with its high-pitched horn. The man cursed, put the fifteen cents in his sports shirt pocket, and spurted ahead only to be stopped by the lines of traffic that had fanned out.

The boy moved on and turned right into the cross street. There were no slopes here, and he pedalled with pleasant ease, not going fast, and forgetting everything except the house where he'd make his first delivery and what he saw

before him: the well-kept lawns, carefully primmed homes, a clean unbroken pavement, trees that looked washed, the general play of color that seemed to him like a minor paradise: it was as if he had been lucky enough to find this street in its natural state; he didn't know about the money that had gone into making it that way; it wasn't his, and he could love it, a little nervously, for what he thought it was.

He pulled into the curb in front of a large grey house that had imitation leaded windows. A high hedge ran around it and along the flagstone path that went to the front stairs. He balanced his bicycle behind a long white car, careful to keep an obvious distance away from it; and watching the hedge unfold as he walked, he went to the front door. With a general feeling of pleasure and awe, he touched the long black doorbell under the name "Brian-son" and pressed. He didn't hear anything, but he knew cozily that something must have happened inside.

A woman in shorts and a bare midriff blouse came to the door, was about to say something politely but changed her mind when she saw him and said, "Oh," and went back into the house. When she returned, he handed her the paper, took the card she was holding. He punched it, aware that his eyes were in line with the not-yet tanned thighs, and punched his own set of cards. The woman looked idly and distantly at his almost clean workpants and dark grey T-shirt, his best. He took the money she extended, which included a ten-cent tip, and said a "Thank you" that went unacknowledged as the legs disappeared behind the door. He walked down the path arranging his cards. An image of the woman clung to him vaguely; he knew where the

thighs led, but only as a satisfied curiosity which, however, still persisted. He was too young for real desire and not young enough to be indifferent.

His first call had been made. Some of his stage-fright dissolved as he walked the bicycle to the next customer's house. He didn't feel it that way, he only felt a calmer enjoyment of things that weren't himself. He even accepted the sour-faced maid at the second house who paid him, without a tip, and told him not to come for the rest of the summer. To be able to remember this, he looked at the house carefully and at the name and number on his crumpled list; he didn't write anything on the list; his brother had told him to keep these things in his head. In a vague way, he knew why; but he would never dream of questioning it; the importance and authority of his brother justified anything. He pedalled to the next address, looking at everything with the wonder children are supposed to have at a circus.

Between calls, he watched a telephone line-man scaling a pole and looking like the good-guy in the movies. The man winked at him, and the boy felt pleased down to his ankles. In a Y-shaped driveway that led to two garage doors, a middle-aged man was washing a foreign car: he wore green hip-boots and a long white coat and the general air of a man dismantling an atomic bomb. In his own neighborhood the boy would have laughed; here, he felt, there must be a good reason. From a back yard, which had more flowers than the front lawn, came the sounds of excited children. When he looked, he saw them, in bathing suits, rushing up a small park slide and zooming, with screams, into a plastic wading pool. He didn't linger, he

knew that somehow at times like this they always thought he meant trouble. He was distracted by a supermarket truck; and he watched, with admiration, as the delivery man balanced three cartons of groceries and half-trotted around the back. Past a few quiet houses, he came to a gardener who was pushing an oversized lawn-mower that tick-ticked with muted efficiency. The dark-skinned Italian stopped, looked at his work and went near the hedge where he had a huge picnic thermos; he poured himself some water—he brought his own—and said: “Hey, you wanna drink?” The boy took it, grinning shyly, his face changing at last, and he sighed his thanks and smelt the strength of hard work as the man laughed and mussed the boy’s hair. The boy laughed back, straightening his hair, and made his call as the gardener went behind the house. He was tipped a dime with a liberal gesture by a man who was well-dressed and shinily clean as though defying the fact that he hadn’t shaved. He walked for the next two stops, catching sight of people lounging on the grass and lawn furniture almost grinning intent on relaxing and getting a tan that hinted at lots of leisure; the semi-nakedness caught his eye and struggled to reach his soul.

As he was adjusting his bicycle at the curb, ready to go to another house, he noticed a car coming down the street slowly as if it were looking for an address. Instinctively he averted his eyes and began arranging his newspapers. Something about the car told him it didn’t belong on this street, and he watched it carefully without looking. It passed him, on his side, and stopped about fifty yards later in front of a quiet house. Two men got out, almost simultaneously: one wasn’t dressed for the hot weather; he was wearing a brown

suit and necktie. The other had his sports shirt collar over his jacket and a colored summer hat on his head. They walked with a silent, watchful ease to the front door, waited, and slowly disappeared around the side of the house.

The boy examined his punch-cards as if he had just remembered something; he mounted his bicycle, and rode back the way he had come, past the car, steering with one hand as though bored. At a safe distance, he hurried to the intersection that had the traffic light, was able to cross on the green light, and pulled his bicycle to the sidewalk and leaned it against the last phone booth in a row of four.

In the booth, he looked in the book, found "Harry's, Billiards" and called the number. It rang a long time, and then a voice said:

"Yeah."

"Lemme talk to my brother."

"That's fine, kid. But who the hell's your brother?"

"Landers," the boy said, "the guy you rent rooms to, Milt Landers."

"Oh yeah." The voice recognized the boy now. "I'll see if he's around. . ."

The phone made a too-loud noise as Harry put the receiver down. The boy tried to catch the background noises, but the traffic outside was too thick. He opened the door to let in some air; noise rushed in with it, and, fearing that he wouldn't hear, he decided to stand the heat of the closed booth. In a while, a voice said:

"Yeah?"

"It's me, Milt."

"Yeah, kid, what do you want?"

"I'm over on Harrington Avenue, with the papers."

"Sure, kid, go on."

"You know that house I told you about. The one you—the one where the people left for the country last week."

"What about it?"

"Dicks."

"What was that?"

"Dicks. There's a couple of dicks there now, Milt. I just rode over here to tell you."

"Oh. Nothing at all, kid, just nothing. The cops'd go, wouldn't they?"

"Yeah, they'd go."

"Nothing to it," Milt went on importantly. "Wait till they get real work. Thanks for telling me, kid. But you'd better get back before anybody notices you took off."

"Sure, Milt," the boy said. He added carefully: "There's another place. The maid told me just now to stop coming for the summer."

Laughter sounded in the boy's ear: stagy, big-desk and cigar laughter, and a voice to go with it:

"Forget it, kid. We're moving up to the big leagues. So long."

"Bye, Milt" He hung up, absently probed the coin-return slot and left the booth.

As he rode back to continue his deliveries, he forgot to notice his paradise. He stared just ahead of his front wheel, seeing the hot road under him, the pants that he thought of as his legs, the papers that looked cleanly grey in the dirty canvas bag: he stared as if he were trying to see reality somewhere. And beyond the trance of vague fear was the

well-known and loved reality called Milt, a warm area at the heart of things that gave substance to existence.

The detectives' car was still there. He passed it without racing and went back to the routine of bell-ringing. A six-year-old screaming "What did you give *him* a dime for?" took his mind off the police, and a quarter tip started him on a mental calculation of his earnings. His mind turned easily to these things; he wasn't worried.

He didn't notice how tense he was. He absorbed ordinary fears the way daylight absorbs a light bulb. A high-pitched awareness could make his innards tumble with joy whenever he stood at the entrance of a nice house, or was smiled at, or rode his bike hanging on to the back of a bus; the same awareness glued him to sexual objects and was beginning to give sexual power to anything that could thrill him, all very strong and as yet unspecified. And of this he had no knowledge: he felt only excitement, the excitement of being alive, like a swimmer in cold water. Danger was a weak thing compared to reality. He was on a high-wire, looking up. But the high-wire had a base: home. And home was Milt.

2.

He made \$1.85 on tips. It was a little less than usual, but he had finished the run, and that always made him feel good. The bike rode easier, without interruption; people looked more friendly now that he didn't have to approach them for payment. He was in motion, free, as relaxed—so he imagined—as the empty canvas bag in his front basket; he

had all kinds of time now, perhaps an hour, before supper, devoid of obligation, not subject to anyone's scrutiny. Nothing to do, nothing that had to be done: a few days ago school had been let out for the summer. Just nothing. He could finally take his ease with nothing.

The lawns and fancy doorbells and joyful bodies receded with his tension as he rode as high as he could on the bike and looked over the tops of the cars. He swam with the noise of all the horsepower and imagined he added to it by riding as efficiently as a machine. The leather money-holder felt like a quick-draw holster a little to the left of his belt buckle. It just felt like that: he didn't act anything out. His face was without expression, it usually was; it had long ceased to register his feelings. He let the bike slide with the traffic down a wide one-way incline that channelled the cars to streets leading downtown. The high buildings moved against the sky. In the distance he could see a large section of the city, and all around him was the color and glint of powerful cars. The effect lasted only a few seconds on the hill, but he got ready for it every time, and tasted it hungrily when it arrived, always feeling that he could leave himself then and there and continue this joy forever, somewhere.

He pulled up behind a truck and stopped for a red light. When the traffic started again, he held on to the back of the truck. A car honked at him from behind, he ignored it. He coasted that way till they slowed for another light which was being manipulated by a traffic cop. The boy and the policeman saw each other at the same time: the boy's hand dropped from the truck as lightly as if it had been in continuous motion anyway. He tried not to look, but the

policeman waggled a finger at him and the boy nodded his head and grinned despite himself.

Downtown the cars crept past a hotel where tourists had double-parked and the doorman was trying to get things organized. The boy watched them unload a big station-wagon of its crisp luggage, and looked—with curiosity—at a boy his own age carrying a bag of junior golf clubs into the hotel. The boy's imagination went inside with him, he had never been in a hotel. The speculation carried him a few blocks to the fringe of the downtown area where the railroad freight offices and the huge brewery stood like fortresses hiding the slums behind them. He rode through the dusty streets, accustomed and oblivious to the off-plumb three-story houses stuck together and built flush with the sidewalk close to a century ago. He was near home now, he wasn't dreaming any more. There was nothing here to fire his imagination, this was real.

He turned automatically into a lesser main street, past a garage on the corner, a Chinese laundry, house doors that led upstairs, a hardware store that looked half-empty, a shoe-repair shop that advertised seconds, a wire-mesh fence guarding metal junk and car hulks: a long bent tin sign said “. . . ien's Machine Shop,” a dusty candy store, a dry-goods shop with windows packed like clothes closets, a tough grocery. He didn't look at any of this; he just saw it. It told him where he was, what sags in the pavement he'd meet, what corners to watch for cars, where he'd turn off if he were going to school, what lane to take if he were being chased, and sometimes what places to avoid if there had been trouble, any trouble.

Harry's Billiards made up the corner of the fourth block,

a six-step walk-up with two large store windows whose bottom halves were painted green. The other two floors of the building had a separate street entrance and a sign "Rooms." Between this and the tavern next to it was a dusty unpaved laneway, a space made by two walls of old brick, containing large battered garbage cans and a fire-escape for the rooming-house. The boy balanced his way through these, proudly stopped and got off the bike, all in one motion, near a corrugated tin structure that served as sheds and stairwell for the building. He padlocked the bike, hearing the exhaust-like noises of the tavern, and, crumpling his canvas bag, he entered the shed and went in the back door of the poolroom.

He always noticed the smell first: dominant cigar smoke, the stuffiness of the cigarettes, the leather-like odor of men at a distance, not unpleasant to him, a trace of cleaning fluid, a dusty woodenness, perhaps the powder of blue chalk—like a child he went for the small things—all summarized for him by the blackish green of the light-shades suspended over the pool-tables. The clucking and thumping of the balls he took for granted, as he did the sudden silences and the equally sudden group reactions: this was just something that reached his ears. What pleased him was watching long fingers chalk a cue and saw the air in front of a ball, a careful lean-over to make a shot, the nervous concentration near the end of a game, the confidence and what seemed like the powerful intelligence of a fat man playing without bending over, the calm knowledge of the spectators, the manly hitching of trousers, a lit cigarette put temporarily on a man's ear like a pencil, the important cursing, a match in the corner of someone's mouth, under-

toned bets made without showing money: the whole world was under control on a big green table. From behind, a cue was inserted between his legs and jerked upwards; he spun and grabbed it with his free hand and looked at the smiling face of a big man with hair showing where his shirt was open.

"Lots of tips, kid?" the man said, as if he admired work.

The boy grinned. "The route's shorter in the summer."

He moved away. He didn't see his brother at any of the eight tables, nor on any of the pew-like benches that lined the walls. A man sitting near the front window looked at him very carefully and turned his eyes back to the newspaper he was holding. The boy just looked, he didn't know the man, but he knew he wasn't a regular. He dismissed it idly and went to the counter near the door.

"Seen Milt around, Mr. Ormond?" the boy asked.

Harry Ormond continued breaking open a carton of cigarettes and shook his head no. He was a short well-groomed man with dark thin hair combed straight back. In his white shirt and deep red tie, he might have been an accountant, alertly calm, efficient, his own boss.

"Haven't seen him all day," said Harry flatly but loudly.

The boy's first reaction was to protest, but as quickly he realized that Harry's words were meant to be overheard. Harry didn't look at the man near the window.

The matter was closed for Harry. The boy wondered what might be going on, but he was used to this sort of minor deception, used to saying nothing to questions; they didn't expect him to know much anyway; and "they" was anyone not Milt, and sometimes even he.

He left by the front door and strolled into the laneway;

once there he broke into a quick run around the back, into the shed again, this time going up the stairs to the second floor. He entered a dim wide corridor with creaky heavily varnished floors that had a linoleum runner almost fused into it and walls whose lower half was old-style burlap stiff and brittle with years of painting. He turned left where the corridor became a T, and went to the end of it. At an unmarked door, he used a latch-key and went in.

They were corner rooms; Milt had been a tenant long enough to merit preference. The boy closed the door softly, an old habit to keep peace with those who worked nights, put his canvas bag on a trunk, and decided to change his good T-shirt to an older one. But that was as far as the idea got.

The man was seated at the wooden kitchen table near the corner windows. He had lots of wavy hair stiffened into steps like a teen-ager preening himself, but his face didn't go with it: it was twice as old as that, as expressionless as sleep, looking narrow against all the hair. He had on a wash-and-wear summer jacket, and the boy knew he wasn't a detective.

"Hiya, kid."

The voice was a surprise; it was pleasant and clear, but the man hardly moved his lips.

"Hi," said the boy indifferently. "Milt in?"

"No. You know where he is?"

"No." It was an automatic denial, this time true. The boy added, "Who are you?"

"Friend of his."

"Oh. How didya get in?"

"Door was open."

"Yeah," said the boy with as much calmness as he could muster, his mind framing rapid images of possible exits and weapons: the windows, a knife somewhere. "Well, Milt wouldn't like it, your walking in here like that."

The man allowed himself a movement, he took his hands off the edge of the table.

"Yeah. Guess so, kid." He got up and walked to the door. "I'll wait downstairs."

"Who will I tell him you are?"

"It don't matter. I'll see him."

"OK, mister, you'll see him." It sounded like a threat.

"Fast, eh? Just like your goddam brother."

The man left, closing the door very gently and making the creaks in the corridor sound natural.

3.

The boy wrapped a towel around the taps and the single spout and let the water run slowly and very quietly into the bathtub. It would take time, but he wanted to watch for Milt, unseen and out of their rooms. He was across the hall in one of the three bathrooms—Harry knew how to handle people—with the door ajar so that he could see his own door and part of the corridor. He was down to his shorts; the bath had to be taken because the laundry woman picked up the soiled clothes Sunday morning and he didn't want to put on clean clothes after sweating all afternoon.

A hard-looking woman, with a once pretty face, still young, but as stiff as a cuss-word, came down the corridor

in a light bathrobe that wasn't covering the bra and panties. She was carrying a kettle of hot water and a large plastic bag. The boy cursed silently, shut the door, tore off the towel and turned the taps on full. She went into the other one, and he resumed his watching, glancing occasionally at the tub.

The noise of the water annoyed him, it made it impossible to hear anything else. He didn't know what he was being cautious about; he only felt anxious to see Milt - before he walked into the rooms. Somehow that was important, as if the man with the fancy hair had contaminated them, as if he might return: if that guy comes back, I'll be outside, and so will Milt.

He turned his own taps off, and heard the burbling of the water in the next bathroom. In a little while that also stopped and all was quiet save for the odd deep splash, a brush hitting the floor, something clanking the side of the tub. Silence for a long time. Then the slow bass gurgle of water draining. It took so long that he got used to it and was almost ready to believe it had stopped. When it did stop, the silence was so dense that he imagined something must have happened while the noise was in the air. But he thought back and remembered that he had been watching constantly. The woman came out and flip-flapped out of sight along the corridor.

The boy moved a wooden basin-stand to the door so that it couldn't swing open wider than he had it. He put his shorts on the stand and very slowly put one leg in the tub, then the other. The cold made him shudder. Standing, he sprinkled his body and fought the water. And with a deliberate motion, he lowered himself to his knees and lunged

like a swimmer and held on to the tap-unit with one hand. He was in.

He stared at the door. Getting into the water had taken all his attention, and time had gone on without him. It dismayed him, and even the fact that nothing had happened didn't comfort him. Something could have happened. Maybe something did: Fancy Hair might be creeping out there now, Fancy Hair might come in, right here. . . .

He got out of the tub and went, dripping, to the open door. He looked and listened. Nothing. Calmer, he climbed back into the tub, sat, and noiselessly soaped and scrubbed himself, stopping every now and then, ready for flight and determined to stay aware of every second of his vigil.

Presently, once again distracted as he was sliding into the water to rinse his shoulders, he heard the hall floor creak. He eased out of the water. Footsteps. Milt's. He edged to the door and looked out.

"Hey, Milt. I'm in here."

A laugh came first through the door, and the words, "You're gonna catch a cold that way, kid, your fly's open." Milt was a great kidder. He was tall, hard-boned, with an angular face topped by tight, curly, black hair. His sharp restless eyes glared a little and tried to look innocent; his voice had a cultivated drinking gaiety, tavern confidence, although he didn't drink. He was in his late twenties, neat, poised, a little distant, his tension resolved into the role he was playing: a cool tough-guy in a white shirt, neck open and sleeves partly rolled. He was carrying a grocery bag. He had knocked over the basin-stand.

The boy almost grinned at Milt's wit, but he was in too great a hurry to talk.

"There was a guy, inside," he said, pointing. "He was waiting for you, and he—"

"There were two. I saw them downstairs."

"Oh." The boy began drying himself. "What'd they want?"

"Little heart-to-heart talk."

"That guy with the hair, he sounded real mean."

"He is real mean."

"They gonna hurt you?"

Milt laughed his laugh. "Na-a-a," he said, "they're afraid I'm gonna hurt them."

"Are you?"

"Am I what, kid? Afraid? Or gonna hurt them?"

"Gonna hurt them."

"Na-a. Keep the peace, that's me. Come on, kid. You must be dry. It's damn near 6:30. I'm hungry." Milt crossed the hall.

"So am I, Milt. I just noticed." He dressed hurriedly as the water was draining, stood the basin-stand in its proper place, cleaned the tub, and finally went to their rooms carrying his laundry in the towel.

At the kitchen table, Milt was arranging plates and utensils on a plastic tablecloth. From the grocery bag he removed two large tomatoes, a small box of doughnuts, and two take-out cartons of french fries, still warm. He put the rest of the tomatoes in a half-size refrigerator that stood on a low metal cabinet near the bedroom door.

He felt the fried potatoes and cursed. "I told that old coot to be here at quarter past six." With swift movements,

he brought the potatoes to the old 3-ring gas-stove that stood between the street wall and the refrigerator. He lit the oven, turned it low, and placed the two cartons on the rack. With the same match, he had lit two of the burners; he placed a black cast-iron frying-pan on one and adjusted the gas to his satisfaction; on the other he placed a filled kettle.

The boy watched him with pleasure: Milt, in the white shirt, slightly angry, working deftly, things falling into place without thought; he had seen him once breaking eggs with one hand and slipping them onto the gleaming fryer they had at the place where Milt had worked as a cook. He had wanted to keep going back, but Milt had said no, the less that people knew about them the better; and so he watched him work at home. Milt was good; he could get supper ready in five minutes sometimes, and often in just the time it took for potatoes to boil. Once in a while, though, Milt wouldn't feel like it, wouldn't feel like anything, and they ate chocolate bars or biscuits and drank milk.

Something thudded gently at the door, like a dog's foot-fall. Milt went to it quickly and snapped it open.

A tall aging man with a putty face and grey self-pitying eyes swung his head towards Milt and slowly handed him a paper bag folded over like a parcel. Milt weighed it in his hand and grunted:

"A buck."

The man dropped his hands limply. "Couldn't you make it just a little more?" he asked gravely. "I had to give out pretty near that myself and it's—"

"Wait there."



Milt went into the bedroom and returned carrying a 12-ounce bottle of whisky. He gave it to the man with the dollar.

"That alright?"

The man held the bottle as if he were stroking a kitten.

"A mickey's alright, yeah. Thanks, Milt. I'm a little short just now, you see. But I got things—"

"Sure."

"You're a good boy, Milt. God bless you."

"Yeah. Supper's waiting. So long."

"So long."

Milt closed the door. As he walked over to the table he removed a supermarket steak from the paper bag and placed it on a plate to take off the cellophane wrapper. It overlapped the plate completely.

"That," said Milt, "is a four buck piece of meat." And he laughed and kept laughing as he cut it in two and stored a section in the refrigerator. He placed his hand over the pan to feel the heat, turned up the gas, waited, felt again, and finally dropped the steak in the pan. It hissed nicely; Milt repeated his appreciation and laughed again. In eight minutes—he timed it—it was ready, and they began to eat.

"They weren't cops," the boy said.

"Who wasn't cops?"

"The two guys you spoke to."

"Not cops," Milt said between chews.

He set about cutting the steak in bites and arranging his food into neat separated piles. Methodically he passed from pile to pile, just eating, apparently without enjoyment.

"They don't know anything about the Harrington Avenue place," the boy said.

"Those two guys? No, not a chance."

"I don't mean those two, Milt, I mean the cops. The cops don't know anything about the Harrington Avenue place."

"That's right, kid. You didn't have to phone me, you know."

"Won't they be keeping an eye on the other empty places?"

"Yeah, but we're not gonna be around. I got plans."

"Well, that's why I called you: so you wouldn't be around."

"You're worrying, kid. Forget it. They can't tie us in with the Harrington job."

Milt ate quickly, stopping just long enough to speak, and thinking out answers as he chewed.

The boy dawdled, and looked worried; he turned back to his plate whenever Milt grunted and motioned him on.

"Did you get rid of everything?" the boy asked.

"Yeah."

"How about the women's stuff?"

"The jewellery? Sure, first thing."

"No, I mean the other things, the bras and stuff, you know, the—"

"No."

Milt had stopped eating. He looked at the boy in the faceless way that is supposed to give away nothing to the police. It was meant as a warning, but it was lost on the boy who, not understanding, put the matter differently:

"Why did you take those things in the first place?"

Milt grinned suddenly, he had found a reason.

"They'll think the maid had a connection, or that there was a woman on the job. And you can't get rid of that stuff, kid. It's like handkerchiefs."

"Oh yeah. I never thought of that."

Something gnawed at the fringes of the boy's mind, but it slipped away as he ate more french fries with his fingers. They could think it was the maid, or a woman; but why not a guy who swiped women's things? It fits just as well. A fact, to him, always offered a better explanation than fantasy. The idea hung there with the thousand other half-formed insights. The fried potatoes were good.

"You know what I saw today?" he said.

"No, kid, what didya see?"

"I saw a guy in fishing boots and a white coat washing off one of those peanut cars, you know, a foreign car."

"In the heat, eh?"

Milt laughed at his own remark. The boy looked at him and said:

"That's right."

"Fine time to have rubbers on." More laughter. So much that he stopped eating completely.

"They weren't rubbers, they were boots. Up to here." And the boy's gesture made Milt laugh all the more.

The boy knew the terms, he could use the words, he even knew the physical realities they represented. But he was always puzzled by the laughter, the degree of it, the explosiveness of it. It wasn't funny, it wasn't even real. The circumstance of sex had never made him laugh; on the contrary it had frightened him: serious, grim, intent, hostile, violent, wilder even than animals; you could laugh

maybe at animals, not at men and women. Milt was looking at his watch.

"I gotta see a few guys," he said. "You can wash up, eh?"

"Sure, I'm not going out."

"Guy from the cleaner's is gonna bring my suit over."

"Alright."

"I'm on vacation, kid, two weeks. Maybe we'll go somewhere, buy a few things."

"How about the paper route?"

"I already told them you'd be going away. Wanted to surprise you, kid."

"We'll go swimming eh? Can we go somewhere where they have canoes?"

"You like the idea, eh?"

"Gee, Milt, wouldn't that be something?"

"You bet."

"Can we get a tent? Rent one? Or you got somebody's cabin?"

"No cabin, kid. We pay our way, all the way. I'm gonna change all this. For good."

The boy wondered at the last remark, but he passed it off as boasting.

"Incidentally," Milt continued, "if you're talking to anybody, or if anybody asks, you're going to a boys' camp up north, for six weeks. About me, you know nothing, I'm just on vacation. Got that?"

"Sure, Milt. I won't say anything, at all."

"You can let out the boys' camp bit. Say you're leaving Monday morning."

"OK."

"And kid, did you talk to Nick about getting his messenger's uniform?"

"Saw him yesterday. He said alright, for ten bucks."

Milt laughed again and said, "Fine."

"Milt?"

"Yeah?"

"We're really gonna go away?"

"We sure are."

"Well, what's this about Nick's uniform?"

"Just a gag. For the welfare people. I prove you got a job, but say you should be at a boys' camp, and they might put a few skins down for your upkeep. But I don't have to tell them I'm your boys' camp." He laughed for a while, and added, "It's time for me to go, see you."

The boy said, "Yeah," to the closed door.

His enthusiasm had dropped sharply, and it made him realize that something wasn't right. Even after discounting Milt's wise-guy tactics, his mind tugged at a fear, a suspicion, but it wouldn't come to light. He felt a generalized fear for Milt, and this threatened to disturb his whole world: Milt was these rooms, the food, the habits of home, the person in whose life 'e could live; he was so aware of all this that a fear for Milt was a fear for himself. But he didn't know what to fear; he couldn't assess the situation or read the signs, he could only react, straining to know, to judge. Thoughts like lost needles rested in the tangled images in his brain, sharp with fear, and waiting like life in ambush.

The kettle Milt had put on began clattering its lid and the boy started getting the dishes ready for washing. It would be fun up north, though, if they really went.

4.

It was dark; but he didn't turn the lights on. He sat by the window and watched the street. There was always lots of activity below, and he liked to be alone; he could fuse his dreams with what he saw, and feel everything as friendly because it was distant and could be looked at and loved. He did not seek this consciously, he only let himself be drawn into it, a calm deep-reaching state that had the power to set reality right.

From the sidewalk below, in front of the poolroom, he could hear the men talking in spasms and laughing the raspy laugh that he couldn't quite understand: rough, male talk, rich with security. They didn't stop when a police car went by very slowly; he liked that. The sound of air-brakes from the opposite street corner meant that the noise of the bus would drown out everything else. He waited for it, and saw it pass carrying only a few grave passengers; and the sounds of talk returned from below, with the smell of diesel exhaust and, for some reason, a wave of beer from the tavern next door. Two thrust-out teenage girls became clearer in the street light and dimmed again until they passed the restaurant framed by his window.

He didn't follow them all the way; before they got to the restaurant, he was seeing women in shorts lying around sunning, well-dressed men who owned grass that had to be cut, wide streets with new asphalt, trees that no one seemed to climb shading a sprinkler that somehow splashed into a lake, and on the lake someone was paddling a canoe on

his way to his tent on the shore. Got somebody's cabin? I'm gonna change all this. For good. Can we get a tent? The wind might be coming up tonight, Milt, shall we tie down the canoes? Lemme make the fire. How long can we stay? We're never going back, kid, we've started moving. That's OK, Milt, I'll stay with you. Milt laughed his laugh. What do you—?

Three motorcycles banged their way down the street like vindictive air-hammers; and his attention caught a saddle-bag zooming past the restaurant that for an instant could have been on a lake shore. He shifted in his chair, and let his eyes get used to the inside of the room. Everything looked clearly essential: the stove looked strong with possible fire, the small refrigerator glowed white and cool, free of smudges and chips, he could barely make out the interior of the bedroom, a long way off a toilet drained and a floor was walked on, he looked towards the door and tried to identify the grey mass on the trunk which he knew to be his newsbag. A passing car cast a moving reflection first in the bedroom and next in the kitchen; the whole place seemed to move; and when the light was gone, he felt as if the rooms had shifted down the block and maybe off the poolroom.

His eyes stopped on the white refrigerator. I got plans. I'm gonna change all this. Big leagues. Do we have to go, Milt? And not come back? Will we be far from the school? He saw himself in the asphalt yard with a lot of boys and a sad-looking man, the teacher, who worried about them; a group detached themselves and were suddenly digging in a dump for scrap iron, one boy had a used contraceptive on a stick and was repeating only one word half-shrieking

as the others laughed and dodged his prodding; the same laughing once more, but now they were sharing with great waste the tomatoes they had stolen from a grocery, some were being thrown at a passing bus; he and his friend—they called the friend Cruddy—were looking at a dead man on his knees in the dirt in an alleyway with his head leaning sideways on the brick wall and his hands by his sides; a black truck with an official spotlight took him away; he looked quickly away from the white refrigerator, for he sensed what the next image would be. But he wasn't fast enough: he saw the same truck and the same police-looking attendants taking away the person he remembered as his mother; tense and partly frightened now, he was leading two boys through the back lanes to an address Milt had instructed him to find, a squawky woman with a face like a malicious owl let the two boys in and said to him: ain't you coming in too? I just brought them here, that's all. You could make yourself some money in here, sonny, and it's clean. Bugger you, lady, I was just told to bring these guys and leave them.

He twisted around in his chair to shake off the memory and found himself standing suddenly and just about to call on Milt for help. He knew what the boys did there, he had spoken to them, and seen them once. Milt said just to bring them and not to go in, Milt knows, Milt doesn't want *me* to do that stuff. Why did you send those two, Milt? Why not, kid? They'd go anyway; hell, they even organized themselves into a service.

He leaned on the window sill for a while and tried to get interested, but his dreaming mood had passed; he was getting tired. He didn't even notice that he was looking for

the man with the careful hair. Slowly, with great anticipation of the contrast it would make, he crossed the floor to the push-in light switch near the front door and turned on the lights. The room asserted itself glaringly, and crudely forced its real proportions into the boy's imagination. He relaxed somewhat in the process; the refrigerator was just a refrigerator, not an extension of his brain, not a morgue truck, nor a specialty house. These things were true, but the room was real, so real that it looked permanent. But it wasn't, he knew; Milt was more real.

He became suddenly aware of himself in the light: he could be seen now by anyone who wanted to see. It didn't matter if no one was actually looking, the alarming fact was that he was visible. He walked to the stove and looked casually over at the window: he didn't see anything. From a shelf behind the kitchen table he took down a glass, crossed to the refrigerator and poured himself a glass of milk. He drank this with slow indifference, facing the window. At the small washbowl, where he had done the supper dishes, he rinsed it thoroughly, dried it, and put it back on the shelf. The clock there pointed to 10:45. He went to his newsbag near the front door, checked the lock quickly, and leaving the light on, he carried the bag into the bedroom, his brain already providing the reason that he shouldn't leave his own things lying around.

The shade was up. He saw it at once; and without halting his movements he put the bag behind the bedroom door and kept the door going so that it closed slowly and created darkness in the room. He sidled past Milt's bed near the window, and standing to one side he lowered the pull-down shade bit by bit and tested it to make sure it

wouldn't snap up again. That done, he opened the bedroom door and sat down on his own bed which was away from the window. In that position, he knew he couldn't be seen, but he didn't relax: he had the advantage, he could listen, and watch.

He undressed quietly, placed his clothes on the chair next to his bed, and changed to an older pair of shorts. A long past command to say prayers stirred dimly in his memory but not enough to get his attention. He made sure of the clothes he'd wear in the morning: a pair of slacks hanging behind the door, a real sports shirt in the second drawer of his dresser, shoes in the bottom drawer, his clean belt. As he was about to shut the drawer, he noticed a bundle of rags he hadn't seen before. With a swift light movement he tried to flip the rag out, but it was heavy and thudded back into the drawer. He picked it up.

As he unwrapped it, he knew what he would uncover, and he showed it the proper respect. He finally slipped the gun out of the cloth and held it with both hands, one around the grip, and one around the barrel. It was a .38 revolver, black-looking in the light that came from the kitchen, with high front and back sights that made it look very agile. He stared at it for a long time: the real thing. He moved his hands over it, and his thumb put pressure on the hammer, but something made him change his mind; he found the catch and swung the cylinder out: it was fully loaded, six bright yellow metal eyes looked at him waiting to be exploded. Carefully he tilted the gun and pressed the ejector rod as his cupped hand caught the cartridges. He put them down on the cloth.

The gun had all his interest now. He looked through the chambers at the kitchen light and tried to snap the cylinder shut by jerking the gun, but it wouldn't fall into place; he pushed it closed. He cocked it, squeezed the trigger and let the hammer down slowly. He aimed it at everything, including himself, held it at his hip and brought it up as fast as its weight would permit; he pulled back the hammer a little, spun the chambers, and finally put it on the cloth and looked at it. And then he was afraid.

He wasn't afraid of the gun; it was what it implied that scared him: it implied an enemy, someone against whom to arm, to fight, from whom to flee in terror. It justified his early tension, and gave reason to a whole pattern of action and feeling: a careful front, an alert suspicion, the expectation of treachery, the necessity for cover-up. Milt was right, Milt knew, Milt would fix them, whoever "they" were. Milt didn't have to wait, he could go after them before they got too close.

With great fear, and at the same time feeling great strength, he loaded the revolver, made sure the cylinder could rotate freely, re-wrapped it and put it back in the drawer with the barrel pointing to the back. The drawer felt like a coffin as he closed it slowly. The image of the morgue struck him like a hammer full of grief. They put people in those drawers? They're dead, kid, they're dead, it's not bad at all for them. But why are they putting *her* in there? Don't ask *me*, kid, it's the law. The law. Violently he pulled the dresser drawer open again and clutched the wrapped gun with his right hand; he didn't lift it, he just held on.

The mood passed. In the street, the three motorcycles exploded by on their return trip. He listened hard for, and heard, the talk rising from outside the poolroom. He stretched out on his bed and turned his attention to Milt's side, to the girlie pictures on the wall, the photographs of impending coition, and he became uneasy, as he always did, at the memory of his brother masturbating grimly. Slowly, the images grew haphazard and disorganized as sleep took away their power.

5.

“. . . Can be done, my way. . . .”

The clear sound of the voice made him wonder. It seemed strange, for where he was he didn't expect to hear voices. He was riding his bike, with no need to pedal, and with the city spread out far below him; he could hear the traffic quite plainly, and his handlebars had guns on them keeping the enemy away. He was enjoying this, and trying to maintain it, but the noise of the traffic distracted him, and the sound of voices pressed on him more and more.

“There's a lot of traffic on that street. If we get . . .”

It was another voice, not Milt's, and the enemy in the shape of fear with a headful of waved hair loomed ahead of his bike. The guns on the handlebars blurred, but they began to feel like toys, and the sky stayed fluffy but turned black, and he realized that the danger had gone behind him, big and confident and moving perhaps faster than he. In a long arc he turned in the sky ready to locate the new

target, but the fear had blended with the black background, the traffic had disappeared, the bike was gone, and he was on ground, weaponless, staring up at the dark enemy.

"... by the time the cops get there, there'll be nothing to chase."

Many voices laughed, with Milt's noticeable above them. The laughter became blacker than the sky, and the boy saw that it was a tent whose flap he was about to open. The voices became stronger. Calmly he began to know that he was not in a tent, he was in his bedroom, and that Milt and other men were in the kitchen.

He opened his eyes, and stayed on his back, not moving.

"Yeah, Milt boy, but we haven't heard anything yet."

"All talk so far, maybe all trouble."

They had closed the door to the bedroom, but it had sprung ajar. The boy looked at the long gash of light; it held his eyes at first as if it were the only object in existence; gradually it dimmed to a slit, and he could see things clearly. The voices had had the same effect: abnormally loud at first, but now almost mumbles and whispers. The enemy had arrived, in the middle of the night.

He knew the floor would creak if he stepped on it, and he would make noise with the drawer as he took out the revolver. And so he didn't move. He decided to wait until they made enough noise to drown out his. But then Milt laughed, and spoke:

"Sounds screwy, eh? Can't be done. Well, that's what everybody thinks. I know, I worked in a diner down the street for two years. I know everything about it. People from the bank used to come and eat there. They think they're safe." There was an edge of hate in his voice.

"Yeah. Maybe they're right. We couldn't get through that street with a tank."

"Look, Ed, that's true, that's what everybody knows. We can't get in. But neither can the cops. At that hour of the morning there's so much truck traffic down there that even a bike has a hard time. So we *walk* in, and we *walk* out."

"That might do it. We'd need—"

The voice dropped to a rumble and the boy found himself looking at a spot at the top of the door, his head lifted off the pillow and his palms pressed on the bed. He let himself sink back and lessened his carefulness: they weren't the enemy. And because of that, the talk he had heard didn't frighten him: it was Milt, and Milt knew how to do things, and Milt with friends was invincible: the big guys, tough, cool, and with guns. He stared at the speckled ceiling, almost calm with habitual tension.

"—get rid of the guns, the briefcases, the hats. Leave 'em in the open, and somebody'll steal them, so don't worry about it. Once on the other streets, you take a bus anywhere, and from then on you're in the clear. In three weeks, after I'm back from my holidays, I'll contact you."

"What about the money?"

"Leave it to me. There won't be a thing on us. If we get picked up away from the bank, they won't have a thing to tie us in with the job."

"What do you mean there won't be a thing on us?"

"Just that: nothing."

"How are you gonna work that?"

"I'll work it. Once we're on that street, we're completely clean. If we get nabbed, we still have the money. And nobody can talk, cause nobody'll know where it is."

"Say something happens to you."

"I got that figured out too."

"OK, but how do we—"

"Keep your voice down, I don't wanna wake the kid."

"Alright, but—" The voices disappeared again.

The boy stiffened at the mention of himself, pleased that he was acknowledged, and secure in the midst of all that confidence and power. He listened carefully but could only catch a stray phrase, grunts, the normal expletives. The street outside was quiet, but the buses still ran: he guessed it to be between midnight and two. A hand rapping on the kitchen table brought his attention to the door again.

"—down here, down here! Not to drive us, Vince. But down here. One minute after we're in, you tie up the traffic, here."

The hand hit the table again. Someone grunted agreement, probably Vince. Milt's tones sounded steadily for a while, then the other men's. They spoke in turns, it seemed, and the boy counted three men besides Milt. Chairs scraped, the front door clucked. In a while there were footsteps on the sidewalk.

The boy swung off the bed and took a step towards the bedroom door.

"Use the back way, Vince."

Milt spoke so unexpectedly that the boy almost jumped.

"Certain guys have been getting curious "

The front door closed again. Milt's steps moved away from it, and the boy walked into the kitchen. He held his hand over his eyes as he adjusted to the light.

"We wake you up, kid?" It was a casual statement, with no trace of suspicion.

"I dunno. I woke up and heard you guys talking."

"Oh."

"I heard, Milt. About—you know."

"That's alright, kid. I have to tell you about it anyway."

6.

Vince left the shed and saw the bicycle in time not to stumble over it, but something tripped him anyway. He fell to the ground realizing how it had happened, but just as quickly another man's foot pressed his head to the cinders.

"The fence. Climb over it, second."

The foot left his head and he saw a big man step on a rusting tank and go over the fence. He followed. The other man, in a summer suit and neat hair, climbed over gingerly. They were in a yard that led to ramshackle garages once used for stables. The big man pushed Vince against one of the doors.

"Sit."

Vince sat. The man in the summer suit bent over a little and spoke in low tones:

"Tell us about it."

"About what?"

"The Landers deal."

"Nothing to tell."

"Yeah."

With great distaste, the man opened one of the garages,

double doors with a large lift-latch meant to be padlocked. They led Vince inside; the place still smelled of horse leavings. Once more, he was forced to sit, and the big man clipped a small flashlight to the low ceiling.

"See this," said the neat one.

Vince looked at a metal scourge made with heavy wire in six flail-like strands.

"This can send you to the psycho ward, it's raspy."

"I won't—" Vince's mouth had gone dry, "—be of much use to you there."

"We won't have to go that far, tonight."

"This ain't gonna do you much good. If Landers sees me marked up, he'll call the whole thing off."

"Yeah. He don't have to see the marks, unless you show him—and then you get more of the same, lots more."

He gave the flail to the big man and took out a large adhesive bandage.

"Hold it," Vince said.

"Yeah."

Vince peered through the dim light at the two men standing over him. They didn't seem to be in a hurry; and the big man wasn't dramatizing the flail, he was only going to use it.

Vince said, "You want more than just scaring Landers, eh?"

"That's right."

"He might cut you in."

The neat man laughed once, with contempt.

"He just cut us *out*. So now he does the work, and we collect. You better do some talking."

"Look—maybe you could cut me in."

"Sure."

"This is gonna be a nice take. I don't wanna lose the—"

"I said sure."

"Yeah, you did. It's—the bank in the Crown Exchange Building."

"When and how?"

"Monday, at 11. Landers and two others walk in. Then I start a traffic jam down the street."

"Who'll have the money?"

"Landers. But he's gonna work it so there's nothing on any of us, just in case we get picked up."

They thought it over. Vince became even more nervous and said, "Ycu don't believe me?"

"Take it easy. Where do you go after?"

"Nowhere, just live like usual. Landers'll contact us in three weeks, he's on holidays."

"So he's running? He'll have to pack that kid brother with him."

"No, the kid's gonna leave for a summer camp."

"Suckers. All of you. You wait here five minutes before going."

The big man hung the flail on the wall, took down the flashlight. They left noiselessly, closing the doors after them. Vince didn't get up. He pulled at his wet shirt, and smelled the stable, and looked in the dark at the spot where he had last seen the metal whip.

2 : Sunday

At seven, when

the alarm-clock began to ring, Milt sprang to it in one leap and said, "Get dressed." He held the clock without moving and listened to the silence of Sunday morning. In more awake tones he repeated his command and began moving to his clothes.

The boy obeyed slowly, still drawn back to his interrupted sleep. But as he swung his legs to the floor, his eyes met the drawer that held the pistol, and memory brought back the context of living. He almost cursed his being thrust into consciousness, but he saw Milt, already half dressed, going swiftly to the kitchen, and he became absorbed into his brother's movements. He heard water rushing into the washbowl, the clank of a safety razor being laid down, the quiet tension of shaving. He put on his good pants and clean shoes, and carried a sports shirt into the kitchen. He had dawdled so long that Milt was finished

when he got there. It was 7:15; Milt was getting breakfast.

When the boy was ready, Milt handed him an egg-nog and said, "Here, you'll be inside the hour." He took it sullenly; he didn't like going to communion, it upset him. And now that school was out and nobody would check, he wondered why Milt insisted. The slight protest he was forming was lost in the idea that they'd be gone tomorrow anyway; and as he tried to urge down the foam at the bottom of the glass, Milt said, "Come on, kid, let's get going."

Milt was a fast walker. In orderly, urgent steps he went through the newly sunlit and still deserted streets. A bus whined past them, raising dust and blowing smoke, hauling a few unwilling passengers. Without people to put him into an alert tension, the boy examined the street with fascination: it felt as if at any moment it would burst with people. Windows were meant to look through, doors to go through, sidewalks were meant to walk on, wires went to people's houses, sewers went from them, cars waited for drivers; only the warming sky and the bright light were untouched and happily indifferent. After eight blocks, they began meeting people, and finally they arrived at the well-kept but blackened stone church.

Inside, Milt said "See you after," and took a seat near the middle. There weren't many people in the church, the crowds came to the later masses. An old woman was saying the stations with pious intensity; children's voices came from nowhere; a man here and there in uncertain Sunday clothes waited stiffly. The boy went to the front, genuflected without losing step, and entered carefully into the sacristy.

He held on to the door, wisely, for the draft would have slammed it. He almost tip-toed across the squeaking floor; he was trying not to exist; he wasn't aware of it, he just acted that way. Feeling something like bravery, he opened a door in the row of wall closets and removed a cassock and surplice that he knew would fit him. With these on, he felt freer; they justified his presence and gave reason to his actions. He peered out onto the altar to see if everything was ready and crossed to the other side of the sacristy where the priest would vest.

He didn't sit down, although there were wooden arm-chairs lined up facing the vesting counters. He didn't even think of sitting down, that would have been taking too much for granted. He walked within a certain area he imagined was allowed to altar boys, and looked with enjoyment at the gleaming wooden cupboards and crisp vestments. He knew all this well, but he could not feel that he was familiar with it.

At five minutes to eight, footsteps that were insensitive to their own noise banged from the other side of the sacristy, and a tall chubby light-haired smiling priest came into view.

"Morning, there."

"Hello, Father."

"Glad school's over?"

"Yes."

"Going away?"

"Yes."

"Good. Every boy should get out of the city in the summer."

The priest vested silently. The boy knew that no real

contact had been made; he was glad the talk had stopped, that he hadn't been asked where he was going. He knew he would have said: camp, and that he wouldn't have mentioned Milt, not now, not when they were going away, Milt's way. But he hadn't been questioned, he hadn't even been noticed; and not being noticed was the same as being above suspicion. Get to church, kid, let 'em see you, it's a perfect front. They proceeded to the altar.

The church rumbled as everyone knelt when the priest came to the boy at the foot of the altar.

"Introibo ad altare Dei," the priest began.

"Ad Deum qui laetificat juventutem meam," the boy answered. But he didn't know the meaning of the words, even in the English which they had given him in school. He listened intently, waiting to hear his cues: "—in tabernacula tua—in nomine Domini—ad vitam aeternam—orationem meam—vobiscum—" The priest mounted the steps to the altar. The boy relaxed, the close part was over, the rest was easy.

He let his attention wander, confident that he could hear and see the celebrant. The congregation didn't bother him; no one would see him unless he did things wrong. He felt as though he were blended with the familiar and yet not really known surroundings; his eyes travelled idly over the small sculptured figures at the base of the altar, the designs in the chasuble, the flickering candles. Slowly he became aware of being safe, safe where he was at that moment; and, by contrast, the fear of other moments stabbed at him clearly: a man with greased waved hair, the power of a gun, voices at night planning violence, the threat of other people. He gave his responses automatically,

caught the epistle signal, changed the book. As he sat down while another priest read the announcements, something said: maybe Milt won't go through with it. The idea held him until he found himself standing again.

"Credo in unum Deum—"

Milt is smart though, things gotta be perfect before he does them; and if he does them, they're perfect. So we move somewhere else, what's so tough about that? Wine. Water. The pouring on the neat fingers. The flurry to be back in time for the *Orate Fratres*. "Vere dignum et justum est—" He rang the *Sanctus* bell. He knows what he's doing, he wouldn't do it if it wasn't foolproof. If he gets caught—he won't get caught—jail, that's all, and a foster home.

He had seen the hands extended over the chalice. He rang the bell and mounted the steps. In the sudden silence, he heard the sibilant "Hoc est—" A foster home's not too bad, the last one was alright, but it's better with Milt. A long pause for the consecration of the wine, three more rings, and he went down the steps as the congregation resumed its noises.

He realized that Milt wanted money and women, but that was the ugly Milt, the Milt something happened to when he was near these things. He faced the painful images: the assertive egoist, the man transformed with sexual desire—and the calm worker who managed a home and his job well. "Pater noster, qui—" But they all formed one man nonetheless, and the boy accepted him fully. "—ne nos inducas in tentationem."

"Sed libera nos a malo," said the boy.

He concentrated on his serving now, he didn't want to ring the bell at the wrong time. "Pax Domini—" He

watched the priest tap his breast. "Domine, non sum dignus—" He rang the bell three times, went to collect his paten, mounted the steps and waited kneeling. "Ecce Agnus Dei—" Dutifully he closed his eyes and received the Host on his tongue careful not to touch it with his teeth—he always felt silly about this: you don't bite God, they had said—and he didn't say the flowery little prayers they thought he should say. He swallowed the Host and followed the priest to the communion rail. People look funny receiving Communion. "—in vitam aeternam. Amen."

He had always wondered about the other people, the good people, who looked so at home at the communion rail: cleaned, composed, untroubled by what was called sin. He didn't feel like one of them, they were lucky enough to be that way, and he was content to let them be. He simply knew that none of them would like to know what he knew, their goodness would regard his goodness as bad: they wouldn't love Milt, or him even, no, they couldn't even try.

Back at the altar, he poured all the water and wine over the priest's four fingers and into the chalice. He liked doing that, it was a moment of reduced tension, he felt welcome. Things went quickly to the end, the blessing, the last gospel, the prayers after Mass. "—cast back into hell Satan and all the other wicked spirits who wander through the world seeking the ruin of souls." They left the altar and went to the sacristy where the priest thanked him and began unvesting.

He didn't wait around: he hung up his cassock and surplice and joined the people still leaving the church. Milt was across the street standing at a bus stop.

"Here's the ten. Go on over to Nick's and get the uniform. His folks'll be at church. Make sure it's wrapped, eh?"

8.

He was still in the bedroom. The others had gone, he knew, and Milt was alone, but he didn't stir. It was as if leaving the bedroom were to plunge him into nothing. He couldn't imagine anything but these rooms as being home, and he felt the impossibility of creating another by mere mental effort. Things were slipping away from him, especially Milt, despite his feelings: all Milt's arrangements were for tomorrow, not for after tomorrow, and they hadn't taken him along.

The men had come, in late evening, one by one, and rehearsed every detail: they were to change to business suits at the railroad station, the one called Sport was to arrive first with a large briefcase and begin a long deposit list, Ed was to go through the motions of opening a new account, Milt's arrival and actions were the signal to begin, Sport and Ed were to move around the central table back to back covering the whole bank, 'Don't stand still for too long, and you won't be a target.' Milt never stood still at any time, he'll be alright. "It's smart not to shoot anybody, they won't look for us so hard."

He had felt relieved when he heard those words; at least that much would remain, Milt's life, but a life that so easily excluded him. The boy felt reality getting out of control; it was tumbling into some unknown destructive-

ness, something bigger than even Milt. All he could do was drift with it and cling blindly until it stopped somewhere. And so he sat on the bed not moving.

"Come on out here, kid."

He lost his fears as he went to the kitchen and saw his brother, real and big, neatly smoothing out a white paper on the table.

"Sit down."

He sat and looked at the paper: it was the floor plan of a building.

"This is the place I showed you this afternoon. Front's here, on this street. And a side door, on the cross street. Remember?"

"Yeah, I know."

"You're gonna help me with this job, kid."

He became alert suddenly, almost joyful. He had thought that Milt was just bragging when they had cycled around the building that afternoon and Milt had carefully pointed out the entrances. With no one about, the place looked as harmless as a convent, and he had paid little attention to it.

"I go in by the front: there's a corridor going in. I cross that and get to the bank. Got that?"

"Yes."

"This corridor now. At the far end, elevators. At this end, it goes to some stairs. If you go down these stairs, you get to the side entrance of the building and out on the side street."

"OK."

"See how it goes, eh? You're gonna *come in* by this side entrance. Up the stairs to the corridor. Then into the cor-

ridor a bit: there's a fancy half-wall jutting out here like a pillar. You stay there."

"Somebody'll see me."

"It don't matter. You'll be in the messenger's uniform, part of the scenery. You bring your newsbag. You wait. When I come out of the bank section, I'll get near you, turn around to look back at the bank, and when I'm doing that, I'll slip you this cloth bag. Like a hand-off play, nobody'll spot it. You start moving, put it in the newsbag, and take off."

The boy nodded. Pointing to the drawing, he traced his movements silently

"Now tell me," Milt said.

The boy repeated the moves explaining as he did so. Milt added the timing, by the minute, and again they went over the entire process.

"You and me are the only ones who know this. The other guys can't be trusted, especially Vince; they might even have something going. I'll be coming out of the bank first, so they won't see the hand-off, or you—and I'll have another bag for them to look at. Outside, I'm cutting out: if anything happens, they'll take the jolt."

The boy tried to imagine the whole action, but he had to push too many possibilities from the picture: other people crowding in, someone who might fight back, stumbling on the street, delays that meant the police would arrive, the men falling out over the money, Milt in the middle, but he had said the get-away was easy; if it was that easy, why give him the sack of money? Maybe—

"You're not double-crossing them, are you, Milt?"

"Me? Hell, no! This is insurance, a fool-proof system. What's the matter, kid, you scared?"

"Oh, no." He was uneasy about having the others around.

"Being scared's not for us, that's what the creeps in the bank have to do." He laughed his laugh and described the panic in the bank in bathroom metaphors. The boy grinned a little.

"Then I come back here and wait for you, eh, Milt?"

"You come back alright, but you don't wait for me. You gotta be smart, kid. Somebody might be waiting for *me* to turn up here, but not you, get it? So just before you get here you take off part of that uniform, cap, leggings, the jacket, and put that in your bag. Then you come up here and get your luggage."

"Luggage?"

"That's right. You're going someplace."

"What about the stuff?"

"You take it with you."

"To—camp?" It was asked so tentatively he hardly believed it.

Milt laughed and showed the boy a map and an envelope from which he took money, a bus ticket, and a letter.

"When you get here, kid, you put the cloth bag at the bottom of your suitcase and pile your clothes on top of it. You change to pants and a sports shirt, and wrap the uniform. Then you take everything, pedal over to Nick's, drop the uniform, and ditch the bike, anywhere, somebody'll pinch it. From there you take a bus uptown, then a taxi to the bus terminal. You get on the 12:08 bus going

to Rougeville, here." He pointed it out on the map. "This is the ticket. At Rougeville, you get off, kill some time, and buy another ticket to Val Laurent, just like you live in Rougeville and are going to camp from there. OK, tell me."

The boy repeated the instructions. Milt went over them again, spelling the names of the towns and adding traveling advice. Then:

"In Val Laurent there's a hotel called Les Manoirs. That's where you're going to stay, and that's where I'll meet you, in four days. They're expecting you." He stopped to let the boy be surprised. He laughed and continued, "I wrote them. You got a hotel reservation, kid. You're a kid on his way to camp, waiting for his uncle to take him. You're the nephew of a big shot, see? And I'll take care of the bill when I get there."

Milt showed him the letter. It had the letterhead: Brenton Metals, Inc., J. J. Brenton, Pres.

"The camps don't open till the end of the week, so it'll be natural for you to be waiting. In here," he tapped the letter, "I call you Tommy, and I ask him to show you how to get to church. The old front, kid, they'll think we're missionaries. But not just any church, cause I want that guy to think I know the place real well. So it's a small church just outside the town, Ste. Marie's, a hick parish. He'll think we know somebody there. Tell me again, kid."

Once more he did so, but imperfectly, and Milt kept him at it until he could begin at any point and go forward or back. "You gotta figure all the angles. You can't go to the cops if you get lost, and you don't want to leave a trail of questions behind you."

"Yeah, sure." He wasn't certain of his own feelings; his

excitement and unfelt fright hurried him and heightened his perception. When Milt put away the drawing and the map, he could still see them in imagination. Reality was now this plan; he didn't question its source or judge it or choose; it was there, and it offered a continued existence with Milt, an alternative to nothingness, like finding a light switch in the dark. But the house around the switch eluded his insight.

Milt's elation grew as he began packing the two suitcases in the bedroom. In his own, along with toilet articles and changes, he placed a new summer suit carefully folded to avoid creasing, and containing all the minor objects he'd need, cigarettes, matches, money, carfare, sunglasses. To the top side, the hammer resting on an empty chamber, he strapped the revolver; and with a chuckle of appreciation he added the two cloth bags, one already filled with square-cut paper.

He came back to the kitchen, retraced everything, gesticulating in quick movements like a clerk checking boxes, brought himself back into the bedroom, stood looking at the suitcase, and finally closed and locked it.

"Now your stuff, going to camp like. We'll get you some real things later."

It would have been better if he hadn't mentioned it. The boy felt his interest sink in disappointment. He watched Milt put clothes into the old suitcase, a baseball glove, a new tooth brush, a belt on which he could clip things, a small flashlight; it was going to be heavy to carry. He wasn't really going anywhere; he knew that, and felt it in a despairful way. The hotel meant nothing to him; it might have been a treat, but not now. He didn't want

to go at all. He felt a rush of love for the rooms as they were, for Milt as he was then, for the secure routine, the habits of living that made him capable of doing things and feeling strong. It would all change tomorrow: the fact upset, and at the same time strengthened, his faith in Milt; and his mind chased a meaning and kept failing for fear he'd find it.

When the packing was finished, Milt said, "Here, kid, for protection," and showed him a long jack-knife. With his thumb he moved a bevelled catch and the blade snapped into cutting position. He gave it to the boy who closed it and sprang it open; in his hand it looked like a sword. He was interested again.

"It's late, kid. You better get some sleep."

Milt moved the suitcases to the floor, and while the boy was undressing, he sat on his own bed thinking and counting things on his fingers. He thought for a long time, and satisfied by his calculations, he laughed in superior grunts, his appreciation mounting as he looked at the pictures on the wall. With a gesture, he said, "Honey gal, I'm gonna buy a whole dozen of you, and put you all right here warm like."

3 : Monday

At first he

couldn't make out how the leggings went; they were each of one piece, made of hard black rubber, and in the dim light he could hardly see the fasteners. The windows were open only about an inch, and the shades were pulled down almost all the way. He knew there was sunlight outside, but in the dim interior he felt as if he were robbing his own house. Close to the window he saw that the leggings fastened on the inside near the ankle and on the outside below the knee. The delay upset him: he had lost track of the time. It took them 17 minutes to reach the bank yesterday, without traffic. Another ten would allow for traffic, another five for delays. He could always walk with the bike if things got really tied up. He rushed into the jacket, fumbled and tied the brass button, found the cap a little large, but disregarded it and slipped on his newsbag. His one idea was to be gone: he couldn't shake off the feeling

that he was late and unready. Just as he was about to make for the door, he peered at the clock.

It was 10:14—he was ahead of time. He took the clock down and listened to it, he checked his own watch. Fearful of error but convinced by the clock, he forced himself to sit down at the table. He couldn't afford to be early.

He crossed his legs and sat back trying to get used to the uniform. Playing a role didn't bother him; deception was part of reality: just being alive made him feel that he was getting away with something. People had to be fooled. What began to awaken a new sort of fright was the sudden shifting of roles: as he looked at the table where he sat, he realized that "home" had been one deception, which was ending, that the uniform was another, which was soon to end, and after that—he felt himself going from one unreality to another, like leaping from cliff to cliff, all the time wishing to land somewhere in between, to disappear into the undemanding darkness below. He resented the very act of existing; and his own eagerness about things, which rushed on despite himself, sharpened his despair. Blurred as yet and beyond his perception lay the emotion that the pleasure of being alive was nothing like the pain of living.

The clock changed his mood. He inspected himself, left quietly and locked the door behind him. He took the corridor to the back stairs and came out into the yard. The sunlight struck like a new situation, something he hadn't counted on. It felt as if it were upsetting the plan, but he kept moving, unlocked his bicycle and pedalled through the alley to the side street.

He avoided places in his neighborhood where people

might know him. He picked back streets with great care, and when he got on to a main artery, he found he still had to be careful. He resisted the usual joy of riding. Normally he felt free knowing that people would dismiss him as a boy on a bike: he could think anything and do anything, the others couldn't touch his inner reality. But this was twisted now: he *had* to be a boy on a bike, and that made him overaware of everything—he couldn't stop to watch things, he couldn't even look at them in passing. All of existence was shrivelled into this one action, and the sunlit city around him had to become an enemy.

He turned into a stream of heavy traffic that would lead him to the end of his ride, and he rode carefully and legally, not holding on to trucks, not walking the bike against traffic lights, not teasing the police. And in the midst of the heat and dust and noise, when he thought it wouldn't arise, he began wondering what Milt was doing.

When he saw the building a few blocks away, he felt his pedalling suddenly become difficult, as if he were pulling the street with him. The building took in the entire block, with massive stones for the first storey, the windows secured with thick ornamental bars, and an entrance that to him looked like a trap. At his last traffic light he couldn't keep his eyes off the grey-black stones. If nobody turns up, nothing will happen, nothing at all, no use being scared, now maybe the others'll chicken out. The light changed. He had to turn down and go around the block to reach the side entrance which was a one-way street. As he approached, he looked at his watch quickly, and then again: he was too early, it was 10:51.

Giving no indication of where he was going, he slid

past the entrance, waited for a clear interval in the traffic, and crossed to the other side of the street. He walked the bicycle back down the street to a lunch counter, parked it on the sidewalk and went in. He had to get off the street, Milt had been clear about that, and he was wondering if anyone had noticed him in the short delay.

The man behind the counter jerked his chin at him.

"Coke."

He put a dime on the counter and looked at his wrist: a minute had gone by. The coke came, and he drank without desire. He watched the traffic pass in constant irregularity, holding his arm in a way that allowed him to see the time whenever he sipped the coke.

"Kinda hot, eh?"

"Yeah."

"They run you around much, kid?"

"Some."

"Hope they pay you for it."

"They do."

Three office girls came in and sat at a table. The man had no more to say to the boy. He sipped his coke slowly, like an hour glass; the less drink, the less time. He could see the side entrance across the street by turning a little on his stool; people came and went through, well-dressed people, not walking slowly. He stopped looking for fear his interest might be remembered. He held his glass to his lips, looked down, and drank the rest in one swallow; it was 10:58, time.

He walked back up the street with the bicycle, recrossed through the stopped traffic, and leaned it against the building. He did so quickly and neatly, as though it were habit-

ual, and without hesitation took the three stone steps to the door and let himself in.

At first he thought the inside was dim, but as he mounted the stairs to his right and his eyes adjusted, he realized with a twinge of worry that he was well lighted. That hadn't been mentioned by Milt; and although he felt no fear, that small point almost stopped him. At the turn of the stairs, he idled as he fished in his uniform for a telegram envelope and looked at his watch: a minute left. The others would be in there now, he wouldn't be seen by them. He mounted the rest of the stairs and entered the corridor.

At the other end, the elevators were in steady use; not very many people were going into the bank. From his position he could see the front entrance and stairs to the street. It was quite wide, with permanently open doors, unguarded. He was awed by the crispness of the people, the air of busy efficiency, the bright cheerfulness of the women. In his momentary absorption he found himself looking at a dapper man in a grey summer suit, hat, and sunglasses, who took the last few stairs jauntily and began crossing the corridor. When the man stopped to look at his watch, the boy knew it was Milt. He was carrying a duffel bag with an airlines emblem on it. The next second, he was gone into the bank.

It was all so neat and easy that he hated his terror and wished Milt had been really what he seemed. But reality was elsewhere. He did his best to lounge, to look like a messenger killing time, but he couldn't stay still, and he didn't dare do anything with his hands, he'd need them free when Milt came out. His whole attention, no matter

where his eyes went, was on the area in front of the bank doors; he had stopped watching the people. All he knew was that no one had gone in, and only one person was to come out. He found it easier to watch by looking at the floor and glancing at his wrist: the noise was like wind in a tunnel, talk swept through the corridor, footsteps clacked and shuffled, and he was aware of daylight from the front entrance. A man came from the elevators, his feet stopped in front of the bank, but he changed his mind and went back to the elevators. From outside he could hear car horns getting angry in the distance, and then silence. Traffic seemed to have stopped, even in front of the building; fewer people came in.

At 11:04 he gripped the newsbag open with one hand and sauntered out into the corridor in line with the bank doors. He couldn't see through the upper glass parts, but presently a hat appeared, the back of it, and Milt eased through the door. He turned quickly, putting the .38 in his waistband, bumped into the boy while handing him the cloth bag, and turned to face the bank again. That was all the boy saw, he was already in motion.

He kept his pace to a carefully normal walk, his hands now empty and the newsbag swinging freely. As he took the stairs, he heard someone, a man, say, "Hey, look at that." He felt like looking around, then he felt like running, and the indecision carried him to the turn of the stairs as a piercing excitement grew behind him.

When he pushed open the door to the side entrance, the first thing he heard was the shooting: then yelling, sirens, more shots. He felt cold. Traffic was stopped completely, a few drivers scurried from their cars. He kept moving. He

made his way, holding the bike, to the top of the street. For a moment, things were silent. Policemen, in uniform and plain clothes, were approaching from car to car to a point in front of the building; people began to show, and before the crowd finally converged, the boy saw Milt, without his hat, sitting on the pavement, leaning sideways against a parked car, his head limp and his suit all dirty.

10.

When Vince straightened up and peered along the hood, the only thing he could see was the car in front of him. It seemed there was silence everywhere. He was still crouched to the side of the steering wheel ready to slump down in case there were more shots. But none came. He sat a little higher and made out two cars in front of his, then two lanes of cars flanking him, and finally movement up ahead—official cars moving hurriedly before the crowds converged. The motion seemed to bring noise with it: he heard a few sharp growls of excited talk, decisive footsteps walking and running, motors idling, a siren from far away, and finally the animated babble of hundreds of people on the move, safe now and gleefully scared, filing out of stores and restaurants and buses, pressing forward aimlessly as the police shouted orders and tried to redirect traffic in vain into another street.

He pushed himself upright behind the wheel and craned his neck for a better view, but he couldn't see anything; he really didn't have to look, he had seen it happening. A police car was parked across the lines of traffic; past that

was an area now filling with people, and beyond that a cleared space from the parked cars at the far sidewalk to the bank on the opposite side: inside that, he knew, was Milt and the two men who had gone with him. He caught the words that moved through the crowd: "They're all dead—How did it happen?—Why haven't they covered them up?—One of them's still alive."

They set him up, his brain yelled at him, they set him like they were undertakers, Milt better be dead or he'll come looking—Vince stared ahead trying to make sure even though he felt certain no one could have survived: he had seen the police arrive, stop the traffic, take up positions. The scene had gone on with him trapped in the car; Milt appearing first, followed by Ed and Sport, strolling swiftly, no guns out, stopping in panic surprise at a command to halt, from somewhere a warning shot which started everything off, followed by another shot almost right away which rocked Milt off the bank stairs, from there crawling and firing until—jeez, I hope they're all dead or they're gonna come looking for me—or maybe the cops'll come looking, maybe they set me up too, a tip-off, on everybody.

Vince slumped back from his craned position and felt himself shaking. His hands were wet, and as he rubbed them on his jacket, he saw that he had sweated through his shirt and pants. He opened the door a little to let in more air; he couldn't take the chance of getting out, someone might recognize him, or remember him later, and he couldn't abandon the car. He felt the car shaking with his own trembling and suppressed a rise of panic in time to realize that the motor was still idling: with a curse he

turned it off and mopped his brow. On the sidewalk a man with a thin briefcase nudged his companion and they laughed at his discomfiture. Vince sat back casually and went through what looked like the bored routine of finding his cigarettes and lighting one.

Something was being done in earnest in front, police whistles blew authoritatively, the crowd was pressed back into itself, and the beginnings of a passage took shape. Vince just sat this time, he had no curiosity left; eventually the cars would move and he'd move out along with them. He felt a little safer now that the first fears were over; if the police had known about him, they would have picked him up before the robbery. He crushed out his cigarette and cautiously went over his reasoning.

The noise on the street had covered up the sound of the door being opened, but his eye caught it moving out about a foot and stopping just short of the other car: he stared incredulously as a big man squeezed into the front seat and closed the door. He can't be a cop, Vince screamed at himself, goddammit they don't work this way, they'd—

"You got yourself a real traffic jam," the big man said.

Vince knew him then. He was the man who had only said one word, "sit," late Saturday night and had held a metal whip under an overhanging flashlight. He was in real light now and it showed a hard wide face thrust behind a large bony roman nose and squeezed by a rutted brow that seemed to prevent his eyebrows from lifting and kept his eyes black and slow-moving.

"Smart bastard, eh?" Vince said, his voice trembling. "A real sell-out, three guys dead."

"He had it coming. You're lucky it's not four."

People were starting to move back from the congested area, all the more curious as they wondered why the police needed so much space.

"And what the hell're you doing now, getting in this car? You wanna get us both picked up?"

"Keep your pants on, jack. The cops are too busy. They're not getting anywhere trying to find the take."

"What d'ya expect? It was planned that way."

"Yeah. Only we ain't got it either."

"So what's that gotta mean?"

"I'm here, looking."

"Here? Here in this car? You must be nuts! It can't—"

A loud "beep, beep" and an urgent announcer's voice screeched from someone's radio. "—who has his offices across the street. Tell me, Mr. Fintey, where were you at the time of the robbery? —In the office. —Were you looking out at the time? —Huh, no, we heard this commotion, you know, from the street, huh, where the gang, but it wasn't until—" The radio was turned down on the man's explanation.

"It's not in here, you know that," Vince said.

"I don't."

"It's like I told ya, Milt and two guys, and me. That's all."

"When we get cleared off this street, we'll drive somewhere and I'll go through the car."

"You won't find anything."

"Look, jack, you were told to be here tying up traffic. That puts you right in the middle of things. So somebody could've planted it here."

"There was only those three and me."

"Maybe you just weren't told about another guy. Or you weren't telling. We'll find out."

11.

He was still walking the bike, a few blocks away, not yet aware that he should be riding. He didn't hear the traffic, or really see it; the cars and trucks growled and slipped past him like silent scenery, huge objects moving on the fringes of his eye, seen but not perceived. What he saw was the other street, and police, the halted cars, and Milt: he just saw it, and kept seeing it, he had no thoughts and framed no words, he simply carried the picture with him, unable and unwilling to make a judgment, knowing from a depth somewhere in his soul what it all meant, but feeling even more deeply the need to prevent his own being from slipping away like water.

He almost walked into the rear of a parked bus, but he avoided it automatically and took to the sidewalk, going slowly as though looking for a confused address but playing no role now, not even the messenger's. He followed the flow of traffic down the one-way cross street; he knew he was travelling in the right direction, but the fact had no significance for him, none of the urgency of escape, only a vague thing known to be there like the absent memory of yesterday's meals. Almost all his awareness, and all his tension, was fixed by the reality of loud explosions and Milt leaning over on the asphalt and in the distance, a siren that had persisted like smoke, now began to assert itself

into his unmoving memory. It grew subtly like a peaceful waking and brought with it at last the noise of pre-lunch traffic. As the sunlight seemed to grow stronger and the street more existent, he realized without surprise what he was doing; he kept moving, pushed the bike to the street, got it in motion and climbed on.

He found it hard to move properly or to go faster; there seemed to be no reason for it now: Milt was back there. He was—but he couldn't let the idea take hold. He pressed on the handles and put all his strength into pushing the pedals down, wanting to rest as the bike coasted, but fearful of any halt. He saw the image of Milt take form again, and his throat ached with his unpronounced name; things grew heavier and heavier, the bike, his legs, the newsbag, and he forced himself to move through the strange fatigue, sensing that if he stopped now, he would be stopping forever and the heaviness would become total.

He saw that the traffic light was red a block away and he braked so that he could stall long enough to have it change by the time he got there. The cars began to irritate him; nobody was looking at him, but he felt stared at: he was himself now, not acting, not protected inwardly by role-playing, and not realizing that his appearance was still in character; the self he felt was weak and vulnerable, exposed like a film in the sun, making him dread even a casual question by a stranger, and his fear made him create questions: "Hot day, hey kid? Where are you going? Run a message for me, kid? Pull that bike over so I can pass. Tell your goddam brother—Don't worry, kid, keep moving, we got 'em fooled"—Milt's voice was back, giving purpose to his actions—"Just before you get here you take off part

of the uniform, cap, leggings, the jacket and put that in your bag—you don't wait for me—don't wait for me—don't wait."

The light changed as he had anticipated and he darted ahead of the still waiting cars. He went faster now, he had orders to obey, a purpose, a plan, Milt's going to make things turn out alright, he'll be late maybe, maybe, he planned for the cops to take him and they won't find anything and they'll let him go and he'll find me, but— He heard the shooting again and saw Milt on the pavement and hated the street with all his might. He felt as though his sense of fact were pulling at him physically to force him to acknowledge what he really knew, but he fought it by charging the bike pedals and clinging resolutely to the plan. The plan was something that had to be done if at the end of four days he were to meet Milt.

He pulled up at the corner where he was going to turn to go home and drew the bike to the sidewalk. It was a familiar corner, a road forked from it forming a fifth street; he knew the buildings, mostly industrial supply centers, and knew how the traffic lights came on to stop one lane and let the other go: and yet the corner had stopped him. It had ceased being the place he knew, it could exist for someone else now. He felt far away from what was his and he feared the distance that was growing between Milt and himself; the further he went, the more his tension mounted. He moved the bike to the street again, and noticed that the grips on the handlebars were slippery; his hair was matted under the cap, his clothes felt scratchy, and he imagined that the bike itself was prickly with heat. Instead of staying on the pre-arranged route, he kept going

south towards the waterfront. He was hurrying now, pushed on by the conflict in his mind, and anxious not to be seen, not to be even visible; he knew of a place where he could be alone, he could also remove the uniform there.

The sun disappeared as he entered the narrow streets of the warehouse district, and the traffic changed to big impersonal trucks that minded their own business. He began to feel a little freer, but the release from noticing eyes left him open to grief—a grief he couldn't admit yet. With the return of the tension, he took to the lanes to be even more unobservable. In a while, he passed between large storage sheds and came out on an unpaved section that overlooked the train tracks, the waterfront road, grain elevators, and finally the docks and the river. He dismounted and led the bike along the gravel until he came to an unpaved road that went down to and under the railroad tracks into a culvert-like tunnel. The road was untended and full of holes; trestles were placed about to discourage traffic. As he went down, he lost sight of the dock yards and heard only the bells of the locomotives.

The tunnel was long enough to curve and short enough to let in some light from both ends. Midway, he stopped and leaned the bike against the wall. He slipped the news-bag strap around his head and hooked it on the handlebars. He threw the cap in it quickly, took off the jacket and threw that in over the cloth bag Milt had given him. The bag held his emotions for a moment, but he stooped automatically and unfastened the leggings which he let fall to the ground as he remembered his shirt and began to struggle it off. A train rumbled somewhere overhead and seemed to gather speed. He placed the shirt and leggings

in the newsbag and slung the strap around his shoulder. It was too bulky and too heavy. In hurt despair, he took it off and secured it in the basket on the handlebars. The train was directly overhead and its noise filled the tunnel: nothing would be heard now. Holding on to the bike, he raised his head and let loose a long-withheld cry: "M-i-l-t!" And he knew as the train passed that he must keep moving and remain self-possessed, but first he relieved himself against the wall of the tunnel, his face stiff with control and his eyes burning to weep.

12.

He leaned the bike against the corrugated tin shed behind Harry's and untangled the newsbag. The heat of the tin was like a warm welcome, it had always meant home, but now he fought it, almost grunting his thoughts as he jerked the newsbag free: we were alright the way we were, everything was going OK. He caught himself in time to keep from banging the shed door open. It was quiet inside the stairwell; he knew Harry always stayed in front. He listened for a moment and heard someone hit the floor with a cue. They were busy; he went upstairs.

Nothing stirred in the corridor. He didn't sneak though, he walked quickly, but he avoided squeaks and stood very still when he got to his own door. It wouldn't matter if someone saw him, someone usual, like the people who lived here. But there were others, like the man with the fancy hair. For no reason clear to him, his heart pounded in his head as he put the key in the lock and turned it and

the doorknob together. He walked in. Nothing. Then he knew he had really expected to see Milt; and something, which he didn't hear, told him that if things had gone well, he wouldn't have expected to see Milt at this time. The plan was that Milt was going to be away for a while; alright, he was away; the plan was that they were going to leave this place; alright, leave it. What's this place anyway? Just a couple of rooms that Harry owns. Harry didn't set them up, Milt did, Milt fixed all this, and cleaned, and cooked, and made plans to get away, and— He was emptying the newsbag and stuffing the uniform into a shopping bag; he worked furiously as he tried to make the rooms hostile or at least unwanted. He tugged off the messenger's pants, put them with the rest of the outfit, pulled on his own light brown dungarees, and put on a sports shirt.

With a surge of hatred he grabbed the money bag and went into the bedroom where he pushed it under the clothes in the open suitcase. He pocketed the knife Milt had given him; from the bed he picked up the envelope Milt had left and took out the bus ticket and some money, not counting it, and shoved it in his back pocket and tied the flap. He stopped to check his actions: everything seemed in order. He closed the suitcase, reached for the straps to fasten it, and angrily flung one end down as he remembered his keys. He rushed into the next room, dug them out of the pants of the uniform, and returned to complete his closing of the suitcase. It was done, he was ready to go.

In all this, as if he sensed its travesty, he hadn't bothered looking at his watch, an action he had done constantly on his way to the bank. He felt no sense of time, just a tightness of perpetual pressure that seemed to make things exist

only within his head, free of the physical and devoid of duration, timeless, like pain. But now he held up his wrist and looked; it was 11:34. As he put his hand down, his eyes fell on the dresser drawer where he had discovered the revolver. He stared, disheartened, unable to look away, his hands already fumbling for the suitcase, finding the handle, lifting it slowly: the drawer implied that the enemy had won. He didn't make the effort to deny it, he didn't do anything, it was too much like being caught in a lie. He lugged the suitcase to the next room, paused to open the door, and set it down in the hall. He brought out the shopping bag, and pulled the door very carefully until he heard the lock snap softly into place.

The added weight of the luggage made the hall floor squeak where it shouldn't have, and he had trouble getting the two pieces through the back door into the stairwell. The stairs wound down in triangular steps all attached to a center post. With a moment's reflection, he decided to put his arm through the cord handles of the shopping bag and let it hang while that hand carried the suitcase; that way, he was able to let the cargo hang down ahead of him while he gripped the center post with his free hand. It was hot work in the tin enclosure, and he was wet by the time he had turned at the bottom to open the door. He didn't know if he had made much noise, and couldn't stop to make sure. Outside, he put the suitcase down and hung the shopping bag on the handlebars; he didn't like it that way, but he wouldn't be going far with it. A bigger problem was the suitcase. It was too large even for the wide basket over the front wheel. He tried putting the short edge in the basket, but it jutted precariously back-

wards; finally he placed it flat over the basket, removed the shopping bag and undid the straps, and re-strapped it around the top metal edge of the basket and the handle-bars. To avoid passing in front of Harry's he walked through the earthen lane to the side street; he had to bring the bike to the curb and fix the pedals for a strong thrust to be able to balance it properly with the shopping bag dangling from one handle.

His effort had made him forget the context and the reason for his actions, but now that he was riding slowly he realized that he had left home, that he had taken the first of many steps; he didn't face the possibility, which was fact, that home had left him by falling on a street in front of a bank. It was too stark and too obvious to look at yet, and so he allowed himself to feel only the sting of leaving the rooms called home, leaving the resolved and gotten-used-to pain, the not-so-bad adjustment to misery, and going into an unfamiliar set of evils.

He rode as fast as he could manage for the next ten blocks, past the church, where he turned up for two blocks and came to a stop in front of a saggy red brick house flush with the sidewalk as they all were, with a front door recessed to allow for the four outside stairs. He drew the bike to the steps and leaned it there in sight while he went in and up the inside stairs. He knocked on the second floor door, but no one answered. He could hear a tap running and someone making shuffling movements. He knocked again, no result. The tap stopped and water began splashing: washday. He opened the door, called out "Package for Nick," and put the shopping bag inside and ran down the old stairs to the street.

It was quiet as he rode away; some children in once brightly colored clothes were filling empty soft drink bottles with water from a rusty and punctured watering can; a tow-truck went by; somebody in a grocery van was parked reading a comic book; two big beer trailers gushed past him. He thought of leaving the bike near the school where someone was sure to steal it, but he remembered that school was finished, and with that he couldn't help remembering that he had almost gone camping. At a dusty park the size of a city block, he pulled in behind a wood and chicken wire backstop and began unstrapping the suitcase. There were tall trees around the park, and solid walls of house fronts on all four sides; he was completely in the open here, but someone would pick up the bike. When he had the suitcase free and re-fastened, he took a pair of pliers from his tool-bag under the saddle and tore the license plate from the front wheel. He put the pliers back and pocketed the plate.

At a bus stop two blocks away, he put the suitcase down and tried to look as if he were waiting indifferently. When he sat on the curb, he put the bicycle license down the sewer, and after waiting what seemed an appropriate time, he stood up idly and fished for his money. The bus appeared. He got on casually. The driver didn't look at him. He went to the back near the door past the only other two passengers, a fat man in work clothes carrying the insides of a radio and a young dressed-up salesman with a big briefcase. The bus made good time with no one getting on or off and finally turned towards the downtown area. At a stop where three people were going to get on, he noticed a

taxi-stand up ahead and got off the back way. He walked to the last cab.

"Guy up front," he was told.

He went to the front car and heaved the suitcase in the back seat. He heard music from the radio as he got in.

"Where you going, kid?"

"Bus terminal."

The driver turned the meter handle as he started the cab. He glanced in the mirror.

"Going to the country?" he asked.

The boy looked at the man's thin reddish hair and thick neck. The identification card on the side of the car said he was A. Meier and that his head came to a line marked 5-8.

"Yeah," the boy answered.

He listened to the meter clatter over the music and all but jumped when it registered.

"You got relatives in the country?"

The boy hesitated; if he said yes, he might be asked who they were and did he know his cousin.

"No," he said, but he had hesitated too long.

"What's the matter, kid? First time away from home?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm—going to camp. Never been there before."

He tried to end the talk by looking out the window, but A. Meier stopped for a red light and lit a cigarette. The traffic was heavy on this boulevard.

"We far from the terminal?" the boy asked to prevent a question.

"No, just a few blocks. What camp you going to?"

The boy was ready. "Red Maples," he lied.

"Good camp," the man said, and the boy knew he was safe: the talk was all bull. The radio promised the latest news after a few more of the best tunes.

They drove on. When they arrived at the terminal, the driver said, "95 cents."

The boy gave him a dollar and pulled the suitcase out of the cab. The driver came around and gave him the nickel change.

"You gonna need it all up there. Have fun, kid."

"Yeah, thanks," he muttered.

There were flocks of people on the sidewalk. It was close to noon and they hurried to lunch in the hot sun, all expensively dressed it seemed to him and happy, but the sight didn't stir him as usual; a brief image of Milt belonging for an instant to that world came into view and made him struggle with the suitcase in haste and fumble it.

"Take your bag?" a voice inquired.

"No."

Inside, people were standing in small lines at the three wickets; all the benches seemed taken and the horseshoe lunch counter was filled. He went to the information desk and said, "Rougeville."

"In ten minutes from lane number 4."

He moved away. There were many things he would have liked to ask, but he feared being remembered. He wanted to know if he could get on now, if he could keep his bag, how long it would take to get to Rougeville, who would take his ticket and when. The questions piled up and formed a huge need, unanswered and unmet, that could remind him of his inadequacy; he turned them off and looked for lane number 4. He found the number painted

on one of the uprights that supported the roof-life covering over the bus lanes. A detachable sign had a list of towns including Rougeville. The bus was there. He could see a few people sitting in it already, and when he walked past the front of the bus, he saw the open door and the driver outside unbolting a panel and removing it to reveal a luggage compartment.

"You want to put that in here?" the driver asked.

"No, I'll keep it," he said and started to edge toward the door.

"Where you going?"

"Rougeville."

"Got your ticket?"

"Yeah, right here."

He fished it out of his back pocket and held it out to the driver.

"OK. You give it to me when you get off."

He climbed on and inched his way to the third seat from the back, chose the right side, and with a prepared effort swung the bag into the luggage rack. He sat down near the window and looked up; the rack had a solid bottom that prevented him from seeing the bag. He stood up and glanced at it. He slid back into the seat, reassured but depressed at the fact that he had had to make sure. Something thudded against the side of the bus; he turned his attention to that to discover that it was the driver storing luggage. A man got on carrying his jacket on his arm; he picked a seat in front and flung a parcel on the rack. After a while, he folded his coat and put that up. Seated, the boy couldn't see the other passengers. He felt better at this for it meant that they couldn't see him.

As he waited he tried to concentrate on watching things through the window, the other buses moving as if they were going to strike one another, the flow of passengers, the pigeons that fluttered under the roofing, the driver getting ready, but he only looked and kept looking, as if his eyes were guided mechanically by the interest and excitement he would normally have had. On the surface the sights attracted him, but his real awareness was focussed elsewhere, within, where he carried a burden of dazed knowledge, a tangled core that was starting to look for a resolution. His bus was announced by a loudspeaker that called off the towns he would pass through, and more people got on showing their tickets to the driver and taking up the front seats. Two teenage boys in colored jackets took a seat across the aisle in the row ahead of him and spoke in low tones. The driver asked everybody to keep the windows closed and started the bus with a backward lurch.

When he felt the long bus move, he had the sensation of being pulled away despite himself, of going helplessly where he didn't want to and being distressed at not even knowing the place he resented so much. All his worst fears came at him now, like wind and from below, life disintegrating without cause or meaning, heedless of his gigantic mental efforts to hold it together. He waited for signals, commands, the spoken advice that could give direction, but his own voice was without authority, a feeble aloneness. Hold on, hold on, just hold on, he told himself weakly, not even tight, just hold, it can't last and it can't get worse. But his fear was more concrete to him than his

whole being, it gave the outside world the strength to break him.

The bus labored to get into a traffic lane and rolled along acquiring a more and more wicked intent as it revved its motors and rocked his seat; the air-brakes blurted like a strange, untrustable mechanism solid and impregnable from the inside; the traffic and the streets yielded to this blundering victor, and it was the power of another thing, not himself, and so was like an enemy; the driver and the passengers, all there and all indifferent, looked unreal compared to his pain; and the unreality extended itself so that he had the shaking sensation of having an all-around view from the moving bus just as his very self had such a view from his own moving body: everything which normally would have been pleasure and comfort was inverted and intensified by the violence of his feelings.

He sank down in the seat. It can't get worse; but it might last. Let it, let it alone, let it last; if it won't go, take it, take it along— He stopped struggling and did nothing, he was very quiet inside, in despair. The bus was clearing the city now and expanding itself along the highway. From a long way down he issued a command to himself to move and touch the seat in front of him. Don't stay down here, something said in his mind, move up, move a little way up, you can't stay here, can't give in now, move, you've got to be able to move, to put up a front, a face, you're going to be seeing people, all over, they'll be talking, you've got to meet them like nothing was wrong—why are things so wrong anyway? and what's wrong?—you'll have to speak to them, not let on and arouse suspicion—who cares now? who the hell cares?—you, you care—wait and see, it'll pass,

only don't stay down here— He touched the seat and wiped his wet hand on the fabric. He had come back from his dissolving center. But it was still there waiting for him.

13.

Dave Simon, who was on the passenger's side of the car watched for addresses until he saw Harry's Billiards.

"Here's the place, Bert," he said to his partner.

"The poolroom?"

"The door that goes above it, rooms, it's his address."

"Let's try downstairs. The poolroom guy probably owns it."

Dave Simon got out quickly and stood on the sidewalk. He was in his thirties, tall and muscular, with curly black hair and a round face with eyes the color of a cat's. He moved precisely and neatly in a way that went with his cared-for summer suit.

"He may have swiped that identification," he said when Bert came around.

"Possible," said Bert Prince, "but not too necessary. Looks like they planned it for a clean quick job."

The second man had a youngish brown-eyed face and the sort of head that looked better for being almost bald; he looked careless in sports clothes. It was near 12:30; with the locker key from Milt's pockets, they had found his clothes and wallet; and since fingerprint identification would take time, they had to go on the assumption that they had the right name and address.

As they entered, moving with the inevitable dead-pan

caution, they saw Harry behind the counter and someone's quiet exit through the back. None of the players at the two tables in use looked up, but the games went on slowly and studiously.

"Yes?" said Harry.

"You the Harry on the sign outside?" asked Bert.

"That's right, Harry Ormond." His Irish tone was a little more pronounced, but that was all the tension he showed, and only he could know it. "I haven't seen you boys around before, are you new to the job?"

"No, just to this place," said Dave.

"What is it I can do for you, supposing for the time being that you're detectives—?"

They produced their badges and identified themselves. Bert wondered if they were dealing with a wise-guy, but he let it go preferring to think that Harry was unusually shrewd.

"You run the rooms too?" he asked.

"Yes, upstairs. What division are you boys with?"

It was a good opening, and could practically tell him what they were looking for. But it wasn't that secretive.

"Robbery," said Dave.

"Oh. Not petty thievery—and that's all this crowd would ever add up to."

"Any kind at all," Dave countered. "Do you have a tenant named Landers, Milton Landers?"

"Yes, Milt Landers. But he's gone now."

"Gone?" Bert tried to keep his voice toneless as they both looked at Harry.

"Yes, gone, on vacation. He left this morning. You can't

want him for anything, he's a hard worker with a regular job, very responsible."

"We'd like to see his room."

Harry took the bills out of the cash drawer, locked it, and came around the counter.

"We can go by the front or the back," he said.

"Let's try the back," Dave said, "I'd like to see the customers."

Harry led the way past one then the other pool table where the games were in play. The stooping players stayed stooped and elaborated on lining up their shots; those who were already facing Harry and the two detectives simply let them pass before their eyes, a futile attitude but everybody seemed to have it. Dave looked at the faces carefully but fast and followed the others up the back stairs.

"Who lives up here?" he asked in the burlapped hall.

"Two fellows who work nights at the textile plant, an old machinist who owns the shop a few doors over, two women quite respectable though they didn't tell me where they were working, and a deaf old pensioner who does little jobs for me from time to time. This is Landers' room, two of them."

Harry unlocked the door and let them in, he followed leaving the door open. They raised the shades and looked around sweepingly first without saying anything, then Dave opened the trunk near the door and indicated with a motion of his head that Bert was to start with the cupboards. They moved everything and looked at it, slowly and with rough fastidiousness, replacing what they moved, the trunk, the emptied refrigerator, the table, tins from the cupboard, pictures, the mattresses, the dresser drawers.

Bert came up with a photo of Milt in hunting clothes; it was a good likeness.

"Him," he said and passed it to Dave.

"Yeah."

They were casual about it, but they took more care with the search after that. Harry slipped a home-made cigarette from a plastic case and lit it with an ancient lighter. He leaned on the window sill.

"I gather," he said, spitting out loose tobacco, "that it isn't him you're looking for."

They didn't answer. Bert held up an oil-stained cloth that could have been used to wrap a gun.

"Yeah," Dave said. "It fits. Proves nothing and we don't need it."

Reluctantly they stopped searching and stood idling in the main room to make sure they had left nothing out.

"Bathroom," said Dave.

"Across the hall. Everybody uses it on this floor," said Harry, but Dave went nonetheless and returned empty-handed. They did more standing around.

"This Landers married?" asked Dave.

"No," said Harry. "Why do you ask?"

"Women's things in there, not complete, just a few frills. Did he bring any women up?"

"Not in my place."

"Sure."

"The fact is, sergeant, he didn't bring any women up."

"Just detective, no rank. What's the other bed for?"

"His brother."

"Brother?" They were interested again.

"A kid brother, about 12 or 13 years old."

"That explains the newsbag."

Harry tried once more. "The radio was making a big thing out of a bank hold-up this morning, would you be working on that one by any chance?"

"A chance," said Dave. "Everybody knows, but for us it's a secret and we keep it that way."

"It seems to me if I remember right that quite a few men were killed. The man on the radio said there was a gang."

"Yeah."

"Was Milt Landers one?"

"Yeah. Look, Harry," said Bert, "three guys died—there was a lot of shooting. Now if you like crime fiction, call it a gang, that's fine with us."

"Milt was a good lad in his way."

"Could be."

"How did it happen that you were there at the very moment?"

"Search me."

"The radio said that an informer had called the police."

Bert looked at Dave as though to get his opinion on what to do about Harry's persistence; Dave picked it up.

"The radio comes out with a lot of things," he said.

"I've no faith in informers."

"Smart." Dave almost grinned at Harry's deliberate Irishness.

"But I do believe the newscasts now and then."

"OK, we were tipped, let's stick to the newscast. We were coming around to that. Do you know any of Landers' friends?"

"No."

"That's what I thought."

"It isn't at all like that, sergeant. I'd tell you if I knew. One of them informed. But Milt was careful about everything, and I never got to see very much."

"Very careful. I'm glad I'm careless."

"However, there were two fellows hanging around the other day asking for him, Saturday it was, and I only know their looks not their names."

"Yeah, well let's have that."

Harry described the man with the neat hair and his tough friend. They seemed satisfied with that; and after looking over the room again, they walked into the hall in the direction of the front stairs.

Harry joined them and said, "It seems the money's not to be found."

Dave became icy.

"You didn't get that from the radio."

"No. But they did have an on-the-spot description. Anyway, it's gossip on the grapevine and everybody's looking everywhere. Even the two I just described to you."

"They were here?"

"They had a look in Landers' room."

"When?"

"Hardly half an hour ago."

"You should have called us."

"What for? It's only now that I know what they were looking for. I didn't know that Milt was involved in the bank thing, and him dead all the time."

"Did you go up with them?"

"No. I just listened and heard them go upstairs and into that room."

They went down the creaky stairs to the sidewalk. Harry kept going, but Bert called him back.

"This kid brother," he said, "where can we find him?"

"I believe he's gone to a summer camp."

"What camp?"

"I don't know."

"When did he leave?"

"This morning."

"With Landers?"

"I don't know, but I have the impression he left early."

Bert said to Dave, "He could've put the kid on a train before he changed clothes at the station."

Dave nodded and spoke to Harry.

"What's the boy's name?"

For once Harry seemed at a loss. "Now isn't that a peculiar thing?" he said. "I don't know the boy's name—he was only called kid around here."

"Yeah. Thanks, Harry."

They got into the sun-heated car, and Bert had it moving quickly to cool it off.

"Damn funny," said Bert.

"The whole thing looks wrong. There must have been more guys on that job."

"The bank people say three, we got three. And a cloth bag full of cut newspaper."

Dave took out a cigarette and sighed the first puff. "If that kid kept his ears open, he might have something to tell us."

"Yeah, after we tell him we killed his brother."

14.

The bus station at Rougeville was indicated by the transport company's crest-like placard which hung from a power pole at the edge of a dirt driveway. The placard was the only properly painted object in sight. The station was a store front full of minor merchandise, with a rampless wooden veranda, and cigarette and soft drink signs covering most of the wall even to the center portion of the screen door. The bus took up most of the driveway, and partly on the dry grass beyond it was a dusty car with a hand-lettered "Taxi" on the windshield. It was a ten minute rest-stop.

The passengers dawdled their way inside the cramped restaurant. On one side it had a counter with four stools, which were quickly taken up while the others stood behind, and a soft drink cooler which was like an extension of the counter; the other side was the store, and the far wall had a waiting-room bench and two doors marked "Men" and "Women."

The boy followed the passengers in and put his bag by the side of the cooler. He pretended an interest in the wall showcase behind the counter and hoped that he wouldn't be served right away. The thin, middle-aged woman behind the counter was busy handing out pre-made sandwiches in paper that looked re-used, ice cream sticks to save time, and an expression that would only smile if someone forgot change for a ten. Her eye darted to the boy now and then, but he was only standing still. A gentle hand nudged him, "Let me in there, eh?" and the bus

driver helped himself to a coke, opened it, and put a dime on the counter. It was swept away deftly. The boy did the same under the watchful eye. He got the idea she would think he was with one of the passengers, and decided that he would leave with them when they were finished. He needed to go to the bathroom badly, but he had seen someone coming out and there was no room in there for his bag; he didn't want to leave it, and it would look funny if he lugged a suitcase into the john. The coke only made things worse, and he'd be thirsty too later, yet he couldn't bring himself to ask the woman for water.

Time halted, but he knew it would pass anyway; it had passed till now without his really sensing it: distance had been created, things had been done, it had become 1:35 in the growing heat, and he felt the same vacuum-like hollowness that he had not quite mastered earlier. He couldn't figure out how to move away from the cooler, he didn't want to be where he was and at the same time he didn't want to be anywhere at all: existence was a moment to moment problem. The talk and the noises and sights around him were clear, it was all mechanically perfect, yet he felt as if he had another set of senses engrossed by some hugely important thing, attuned to it fully, alert with perpetual longing and ready to follow it somewhere into nothing. His eye fell on the half-clad girl on the front page of a red-inked tabloid and the partial sentence, "Mother sells—" and he was afraid he was going to think of Milt when the bus driver said, "One minute," and left the store.

As the passengers were filing out, he grabbed a heavy-looking dime cake and quickly put a quarter on the counter; he took his change, which appeared fast, stuffed the

cake into his pocket as he lifted the bag, and walked out leaving the disapproving eye behind. He couldn't help noticing the heat, it was like an added weight; the bus glowed under the overhead sun looking as though it were going to become animate, and the dusty taxi seemed to be charred. He saw that he was alone on the hot gravel, the bus was revving to a start with its air-conditioning windows closed, some of the passengers looked at him. He put the bag down and examined his watch as though he were in for a long wait. The bus moved forward and swung out to take the other highway that formed the Rougeville junction. When the bus was completely out of sight, he looked at the set of route signs, it had one that said "Val Laurent, 55 mi." He picked up his bag and started walking.

The road quivered and melted in the distance and forever waited for him. He wasn't going to buy a ticket from the hawk-faced woman, and he feared another bus ride. He felt better walking on the road, he was alone; and if he kept moving, anyone could think he just got off the bus like the people who got off in the middle of the country. It didn't matter to him that he couldn't possibly walk all the way, he didn't bother thinking about that: for the moment he was freer than before, he knew he had to keep going, and he was going under his own power. But slowly. The heat was telling. His eyes ached with glare, he switched hands but didn't put the bag down doing it, and the tall grass on the side of the road kept watching him with infinite leisure. He was nowhere. And that was something. It was better than being somewhere.

The road began rising and curving after a while, and the fences stopped. Nothing moved. As he reached the top

of a rise, he saw that the trees became smaller and denser with wild growth all around them spreading over the rolling country and bordering the next rise in the road. He turned off without having to decide to and worked his way up the small hill through which the road passed below. When he reached the trees and felt their coolness, he sank to his knees and realized he had been too long in the sun. His hair was too warm to the touch, and the metal on the bag was stinging. He pushed it behind a tree as though to hide it from the highway and noticed that by being down he couldn't be seen from there.

Stopping had made him feel the pain in his stomach, and remembering the grim woman and the uninviting bathroom, he went further off and knelt again to urinate, careful not to splash himself; he went back to his bag in a half trot, clumsy with fatigue, eager to get down and stay down, but he had to peer at the highway before he finally sat and leaned back against a tree.

He didn't quite get to enjoy the lull. For a short time, the stillness was complete as though it had actually settled over the countryside and spread over the upward rolling hills like a real and permanent existence. But it only made a background for strange noises: a bird cracked a sharp squeak and fluttered away with a sound like panic, a twig moved and twitched like life as he relaxed his leg and he had to ascertain that it wasn't a threat, the sound of bees made him cock his head, and a distant car gathered speed to whoosh by below him. He stayed alert, his forearm resting on the hard form of the spring-knife in his pocket.

Gradually, by not caring, by telling himself to let it all happen first before getting jumpy, he was able to relax

a little, but he didn't run the risk of moving. His attention expanded with the scenery and he caught more distant sounds far away and safe. A small breeze nudged the hot leaves and brought with it a sort of whine which he thought was a buzz-saw at work or a cicada announcing heat. He watched the clouds puffing themselves out lazily on the horizon; little by little his surroundings lost their initial strangeness but not enough to leave him at the mercy of his own thoughts, and he found himself less unwilling to stay and prolong a precarious moment of peace.

After a long while he took out the squashed and warm cake from his pocket and ate most of it because he didn't want to throw it away. The cellophane wrapper looked like a trespasser on the ground and without warning made him think of neatness and well-kept rooms and efficient cooking— He stood up and kept himself busy by wondering what he could do for water, but he gave that up and decided to get back to the road. By the time he had climbed down and was walking again, the heat had resumed its pressure and the molten patch waited up ahead. He aimed at a lone tree at the bottom of a long dip and stopped there to get the sun from his head. He heard a car coming as he got the bag ready to sit on. It lost speed as it got near, and he turned to look at it, an opened convertible, glaring white and driven by a woman who brought it to a stop just a little past him. He didn't move.

The woman turned her radio down and took off her sunglasses.

"The next town's at least fifteen miles away. Did you know that?"

He shook his head no. He could still hear the music on the radio.

"Well, get in. You can't walk that, the way *you* look."

He put the bag in the back and got in. The car pulled away with a screech and he wondered if his bag would bounce out. The woman was blonde and dark-eyed, trim, young except for the immobile face, and dressed in white shorts with a matching blouse. She glanced at the boy and put back her glasses.

"Are you broke, kid?" she asked.

He didn't know what to say and he didn't want to hesitate.

"No," he muttered, and paused. "No—I missed my bus."

He thought that if she had a car, she wouldn't know anything about bus schedules.

"This your car?" he added.

"No, my friend's, he lets me have it."

"It's nice."

"Don't I know it. He gets a new one every year. Where are you going?"

"Val Laurent."

"I can take you all the way, I'm passing through there—he wants to go fishing. Fishing he calls it."

"Does he have a camp?" he asked and immediately wondered why.

"A camp! He's even got an elevator in the place."

She passed a car whose driver seemed surprised, and swung back in without showing any intention of slowing. He watched the speedometer teeter around 80 and noticed, when he looked at the accelerator, that she had kicked the sandal off her driving foot. He thought she'd get her foot

dirty that way and liked her for it. Her legs and thighs were evenly bronzed.

"What do they call you?" she said suddenly, slowing down to seventy as though she'd forgotten an important point.

"Tom," he lied.

"Not Tommy?"

"Well, yeah."

"What place are you going to in Val Laurent?"

"Les Manoirs, it's a hotel."

"Oh, yeah. I know. I used to work there before they— It's a nice place."

He wanted to ask her all about the hotel, but he didn't want to give her a chance to question him too closely. She took a curved zone that had a thirty mile warning and kept the car at fifty. It screeched, but it held.

"How come you're going to a hotel?"

"I'm gonna meet my uncle and we're going camping."

"Oh. Couldn't he come with you now?"

"He's away, on a business trip, he said to wait for him up there. He's paying."

"Rich uncle, eh?" And she laughed.

"Yeah."

He was wishing she'd stop talking; the need to lie was a strain, and the truth had a way of leaping at him: the whole world was factual, the moving scenery, the car, the woman, himself, and he hoped—without formulating it—that he could add his own knowledge to it, perhaps by saying something to her, something like the truth, and maybe she could hold up a corner of existence. But it was only a vague urge. She was talking again.

"Anything wrong, kid? You don't seem too keen."

He remembered the cab driver's interpretation and said, "Well, it's my first time away—" He couldn't bring himself to say "from home."

"Away from home?" she added.

"Yeah."

"You'll get used to it. I left home when I was fifteen, and it wasn't for a camping trip either."

He wondered, without even bothering to want to ask, what that had been like.

"There's the turn-off to the autoroute. Ever been on the autoroute?"

"No."

"Like to go?"

"Yeah."

She had to slow down and stop at the automatic tolls. "See that red light. Watch it turn green when I throw my quarter in."

He watched, fascinated. Then he saw the two police cars and the officers in the light blue uniforms of the special highway division. He was glad to be away again, but he felt they were going fast enough to attract their attention, and he tried to approach the subject.

"Does this go to Val Laurent?"

"Sure. It ends long before that."

"Can we go this fast on it?"

"This isn't fast. Besides my friends got friends." She laughed at her own wit.

He went back to watching the road and the park-like siding that puzzled him a little. No, he couldn't say much,

not to her, not even a hint, best to be somebody she's going to forget when you get out of the car.

"You hungry, kid?"

"No."

"We could stop when we get off the route."

"No, that's alright."

"This is better than the bus, eh?"

"Lots better."

Nothing more was said for a long time. Eventually he put his arm on the door and his hand to the airstream, he felt only a vague urge to stand up and see what it would be like on his face. This was better than the bus, and it could have been terrific, a ride like this, but it was only a ride with someone who went fast and talked too much and didn't really want to know, others would want to know though and the answers had better be good or else, or else what? What good would good answers do? Or bad answers? He caught himself and glanced at the woman when it occurred to him how much he was presuming by thinking that way: the answers had to be good, they were planned that way, planned by someone whose name he didn't use even in his imagination.

They left the throughway and bounced onto a two-lane road and tried to zoom through several towns with the woman commenting on the drivers. When they were in the open again, she spoke.

"Not far now. You anxious to get there?"

"Yeah, yeah."

"When you get to that hotel make sure they don't overcharge you. If they think you're the kid of some tourist,

they'll do it and plenty, especially if they know your uncle's paying for it."

"Oh. Will they really do that?"

"I'll say they will."

"I didn't know. I never been in a hotel before."

"You never? Are you sure you're not running away from home?"

"Sure, I'm sure." The question was so goofily direct he began to surmise how much she suspected, but he remembered that she had run away from home.

"Your uncle doesn't do this very often, does he?"

"No." It was the only answer, a defense was impossible. He searched for a foolproof line that anybody would go for. "You see, there's been a death in the family." It just came out, as if it were safe to let it come out while he was lying and playing a role; it skirted his true emotions and had the value of being sentimental.

"Gee, I'm sorry, Tommy. Who was it? Can you talk about it?"

"My mother." He couldn't stop now. "Yeah, I can talk about it," he added to prevent any possible coaxing and consoling.

"You poor kid." She was going much slower now. "I guess in a way you *are* leaving home."

"It's alright. She'd been sick for a long time in the hospital."

"What did she have?"

"Cancer."

"Oh, I hope I don't get that." The car jolted ahead as if to avoid the dreaded name, and there was no talk until a sign announced Val Laurent.

"This is it."

It was busier and bigger than the other towns, a summer resort area that showed a long beach between the roadside houses, a string of rowboats, and eventually wooden wharves with launches alongside. The town had a main street that looked like a shopping center and had about as much traffic.

"It's better further north," she said. He didn't bother to figure out what she meant, his heart pounded so much he could feel it in his hands. He fixed himself in rigid self-possession and let his eyes work out his excitement.

The sun was still strong enough to make everything look like a grim picnic; people in sports clothes walked about idly but seemed as if they should be in a hurry; the noise of motors and talk was constant, like an accompaniment to the heat; music came from a record shop and someone with a loudspeaker on his car was pushing an important event; a family trailer crawled ahead of them and he had time to read a sign forbidding women to wear shorts in public. They moved through a cloud of gas fumes for a few blocks. Then she turned and stopped on the corner.

"Here you are."

It was a three-story building, quite long, with a veranda running up the side street and entrances on both streets. The neon that said "Les Manoirs," with a very small first word, was hung on the main street.

He moved out of the car slowly and took his bag.

"You scared? You want me to see you in?"

"Oh no, no," he said, tightening his grip on the handle. "Thanks for the lift." Get going, can't you? his brain shouted at her through his nervous eyes.

"Good luck, kid."

She powered the white car up the street.

He wished he knew of another place to go. He could feel something going wrong, getting worse, but he couldn't stand out on the street much longer. He went up the steps to the veranda and opened one of the double doors.

The lobby was dark after the sunlight and cool; he could feel his face burning and cold drops sliding down his ribs. He made out a cigarette machine near the long windows that were shaded against the glare from the main street, big leather armchairs in the far corner that was panelled in wood and looked shinily old, a wide staircase partly obscured by a showcase whose contents he didn't examine, modern chairs where he stood, a red sofa; to his left was the bar, it gave out on the veranda. He looked at his watch to appear more purposeful but he didn't notice the time. There were sounds coming from the bar, a few people talking over a muted high-noted quartet doing a cornball number. He tried again to spot the desk and failed and looked at his watch again.

He finally saw it when he moved in desperation. It was in the corner made by the stairs and the bar wall. There was nobody at it, he had the lobby to himself. As he passed the entrance to the bar, he saw two men sitting at the counter at the far end. One was turned facing him, a tall, happy-looking man who drew on a cigarette casually and blew ash from the sleeve of his light crumpled jacket. The boy avoided his eyes and went to the desk to wait. He didn't ring the call bell or touch anything, he felt as though sliding panels were peering at him.

The man he had seen in the bar wandered into the lobby

and inspected the cigarette machine without buying anything. On his way back, he turned his head slowly in the boy's direction and stopped.

"Waiting for the clerk?" he asked pleasantly.

"Yes."

"He's probably around. If you ring that bell—"

"It's alright. I'm in no hurry."

"Here for a vacation?"

"Yes."

The man nodded and partly smiled. He went back to the bar.

By the time the boy had allowed himself to start shuffling, the door from the main street opened to let in a shortish thin man wearing a short-sleeved porous shirt and a pale blue bow-tie and holding up a handful of papers that looked like bills. He walked in quick movements and flicked a look at the boy as he went around behind the desk. He put the papers in a drawer, which he unlocked, and said "Yes?" to the boy as he did so.

"I'm—"

But the man wasn't looking at him and he couldn't continue. The clerk had glasses whose frame gripped only the tops of the lenses like a welder's giving him a severe brow; the severity was aggravated by the straight black hair combed back almost solidly.

"Yes?" he repeated in a tone that suggested he didn't want any raffle tickets. But he looked at the boy this time.

"My uncle made a reservation for me," he said as though he were pausing to check the spelling of each word.

"What name?"

"Brenton."

"Brenton. Was that J. J. Brenton?"

"Yes."

"I see."

He opened another drawer and took out more paper. He finally found something, but the boy could see that it wasn't Milt's letter.

"Ah, yes," said the clerk. "He wrote asking for a room with a TV set. But we had none left. Would a radio be enough?"

His voice was tonelessly neutral and pleasant enough to muffle the irony, but his wording had an edge that the boy felt.

"I don't care, but I guess it would be alright."

"I tried to reach your uncle to explain," the clerk said, looking steadily at the boy, "but the letter came back."

He froze and summoned the memory of the letterhead: there had been only one line at the top about Brenton Metals, and that meant there was no return address.

"Oh," he said with as much indifference as he could muster, "where did you send it to?"

"Montreal. The postmark was from there. There was no address but I imagine they could find it easily. But it seems they didn't."

"My uncle travels a lot, he doesn't live in Montreal. I heard him say once that he uses a post office box when he's in town long enough."

"Where does he live?"

But the boy felt he was deep enough. He said, "Why do you have to know that?" He said it without belligerence, innocently, with a rising tone at the end that's supposed to be kid talk.

"I don't exactly. It's just that it presents a little problem, not important at all, but the owner would feel it necessary to clear it up."

"Oh, well, can it be cleared up?"

"Perhaps. You see, you're a minor—you know what that is?—and we can't collect from minors, that is if the minor can't pay. So—" He let the conclusion hang as if he enjoyed it.

The boy took all the bills he had crumpled in his pocket and laid them on the desk by opening his fist. The clerk looked at them as if they were spiders and slowly counted them.

"You have twenty-six dollars here—"

"I have more in my wallet. He said I'd need it."

"—twenty-two will pay for two days in the room you're getting. Here's your four."

He pushed the four towards the boy, the rest to one side, and took out a registration card. He filled it himself, asking the boy the questions—"Occupation?" "School-boy"—and turned it over to him to sign.

"Staying long?" he said in a preoccupied way, and fussed with the papers. The boy saw the Brenton letterhead and the clerk's eyes go from his signature to the letter.

"It could be a week, or it could be tomorrow, I don't know."

"Ah, yes. We'll see."

He locked everything, took a key tab from a rack and came around the desk.

"I'll show you the room," he said and decided to carry the bag himself.

They went up the wide stairs to the third floor and

turned twice, disorienting the boy who was watching the bag, and stopped at the end of the hall. The clerk opened the door, number 313, put the bag just inside, and gave the boy the key.

"You can leave that at the desk whenever you go out. And, huh, I'll have someone bring the radio up."

The boy closed the door as soon as the clerk's head was turned and made sure it was locked. The bastard, he was gonna throw me out, well he won't when—but he had to stop. He dragged the bag along the floor and threw it on the bed, tugged the straps open and jabbed the key in the small hole. He flung it open and reached for the cloth bag. He simply put his hand on the fist bundle, felt for a few bills and drew out five twenties which he pressed into his pocket. Let him try, that bloody— He closed everything, straps and all, and sat on the bed. You can leave the key at the desk, like hell, leave the key at the desk, so you can come snooping around like you had your nose up a— He slammed his fist on the bag.

Just then somebody knocked on the door. He ran from the bed and spun around like a fighter in a crouch, in defence against whoever was coming in. But he remembered locking the door. He went over.

"Radio for this room?" said a twenty-year-old stocky lad in a thick T-shirt.

"Yeah," the boy said and took it from him. There was an awkward pause and the T-shirt went away. He put the radio on the floor and checked the door. He turned from it, forgetting the radio, still jittery with his fright, and walked tiredly towards the bed. He stayed standing and looked the room over.

When he saw the sink, he went to it and drank two glasses of water pausing only to fill up. He left the shades as they were, partly shut, but looked out to see the main street below, and at the other window a lane that was shared with the side brick wall of a restaurant. The door he opened was a bathroom with a plastic shower stall.

He must have felt himself going without quite admitting it, for he picked up the radio and plugged it in and turned it up loud when it was warm. He undressed and adjusted the shower, muttering and almost burbling to himself; he got in and as he felt the water, he didn't get to pick up the bar of soap. Instead he was yelling into the water's noise, weeping with groans, and he sank down to the shower floor trying to pretend he wasn't crying because he couldn't feel his tears for the water.

15.

They knocked and walked in at a door marked "E. Martin Haroldson, Co-ordinator." They had been announced.

"Ah yes," said Haroldson when he saw them, "you gentlemen are from the police."

"That's right," said Prince. "We called a while ago."

"Sit down, sit down. Sorry I couldn't see you before this, but I was tied up till five."

Haroldson waved at the two wooden armchairs facing his desk. He was neat, in brown, looking as if he had just changed to a fresh shirt; he had clipped curly brown hair, a young face that was pleasant with a decisive firmness, and

the air of a confident professional. He sat down and put his elbows on the desk behind a small pile of files.

"Are you with Juvenile?"

"No, Robbery Division."

"Well, as you may know, we have regular people assigned to working with your Juvenile Division. If the boy is in any trouble, he'll pass through the usual channels."

"Yes, we know that," said Simon. "All we want is information. We'd like to find him to talk to him. He's not at home."

"I see. He's in no trouble then?"

"Not that we know of. We were told that a social worker from here checks on them periodically. He's supposed to be—"

"Yes, as a follow-up. The Landers situation is unusual from our point of view. Theoretically, however, he's passed out of our hands; his brother's his guardian. If he's not at home, I don't believe any of our information can be of any use to you."

"We were told he'd left for a summer camp."

"One of ours?"

"Only an assumption."

Haroldson went to a filing cabinet and pulled out four folders. He brought them to the desk and flipped through each one to what seemed to be the proper alphabetical section.

"No," he said. "He's not listed with us. Besides our groups will only begin leaving tomorrow."

"Is that true of other agency camps?"

"It varies. Hold on."

He picked up the phone and dialed once. "Jack," he

said into it, "Marty. Can you find out if the Landers boy is listed for camp with another agency?— Right."

"Could be at a private camp," said Prince to Simon.

"That costs. But maybe Landers figured he'd be able to afford it. Mr. Haroldson, does the boy have any relatives?"

Haroldson spread out the files on his desk and opened one.

"No, no relatives."

"Friends of the family, of his brother, where he could go for the summer?"

A page was turned, then another.

"No-o-o. Not that we know of."

"What was the boy's usual summer routine?"

"—paper route."

"That's been dropped, they were told he'd gone to camp."

"—seems he stayed in town, did odd boy's jobs, a lot of swimming at the public pools, never in trouble once he was with his brother, nothing suspicious beyond being close-mouthed with our worker. I'm sorry—" He continued reading the file and shaking his head. He opened another file and moved a finger down its pages. "There's nothing in Milton Landers' file. But you'd have that in your own records, they start where ours leave off; he became of age when he was in the detention home and got transferred to prison."

The phone rang.

"Yes? Oh yes, Jack.— Oh. Alright, thanks." He replaced the phone and looked at Simon. "He's not with an agency camp. Now there's all kinds of boys' organizations, business organizations and what not that run camps. But he'd have

to apply, and they'd probably get around to asking us for some kind of information on the boy. I'd say he's not at a camp."

Simon took an offered cigarette and lit it.

"Have you any idea what the boy might do if he were on his own?"

"On his own?"

"Yes, if he had to fend for himself."

"He's pretty young." He glanced at the file. "He's 12. Precocious, viciously so according to one of our workers. To be frank, we were glad when he was taken off our hands. He was very difficult, disturbed. He couldn't stay in any of our institutions, nor foster homes, which was one of the reasons why his brother was released from prison early. The boy was very attached, neurotically so. But on his own. I don't see— If he's on his own, then he's our responsibility. But I can't imagine what he'd do, actually. Is it important?"

"If it isn't, it will be."

"But he'd never leave his brother and go off on his own. He ran away from foster homes, but he wouldn't—"

"He has to, Mr. Haroldson. We're giving out as little information as possible, but Landers was shot and killed this morning trying to rob a bank.

"I see."

"We think the boy might be able to tell us something about his brother's contacts."

"He'll be very uncooperative, especially with you."

"He might listen this time."

"Two of my workers, good ones, had to give up on him."

"He had his brother then."

"The shock of this will make him even worse. By the time you find him you may be dealing with a psychotic child."

"Yeah."

They sat in silence for a while, and Prince spoke.

"Would he look for help from the agency?"

Haroldson played with the papers.

"I doubt it," he said. "You can't tell what he'd do. And we'd be part of his disturbance. He's projected a great deal of his conflicts onto us. In his mind, we took him away from his mother. She was totally incapable, an occasional prostitute, a drinker, was deserted when Milton was born, he's—" He looked at the file. "—26 now, and the boy was born, just born, into a very squalid situation. He came to our attention when the elder brother had to face charges for auto theft, as a juvenile, and we tried to place him then but it didn't work. She died while Milton was in the detention home. The sons identified her, that is the older one had to, and the boy insisted on going, a terrible business. It was all beyond the boy's understanding, he was 6 then, and for the next three years was the most difficult case in our files. He actually campaigned to get his brother back by being thoroughly uncontrollable and incorrigible, and they did it. The older Landers was a model prisoner. He learned to run a linotype, operate a lathe, and he became an expert cook; a compulsive paranoid of his intelligence can do all of that and more. In a way, it looked solved when they set up house, solved because they were away from us. He wouldn't look us up, especially not if he becomes mentally disturbed."

Simon stood up slowly.

"Thanks, Mr. Haroldson. Could you talk to your workers, see if they can come up with pals of his he might go to, anything like that."

"We'll do all we can."

They left the office and trudged out to the car without speaking.

"Let's get some supper."

"Landers was getting set for a two-week vacation," said Simon. "He might've sent the boy ahead."

"Yeah, but where?"

"Could only be with friends."

"Kid's bound to hear about it."

"And start running."

"A kid doesn't get around that easy, somebody's bound to spot him. So he might stay put."

"Yeah," said Simon. "We'll probably hand it over to Juvenile anyway."

Dave Simon entered the captain's office and was surprised to see the two uniformed officers there. They were a little uncomfortable in these surroundings and stood as casually as possible with their hands clasped behind their backs. Simon stood with them.

"I should've stayed in the army, they let you digest your supper."

They grinned

"Yeah," said one, "walking twenty miles with a full pack."

"In this outfit you do more than that in a day."

"Not us. We were cruising."

Simon recognized them then, they had been on the

scene at the bank that morning. He nodded to the detective-lieutenant who was seated next to the captain's empty chair looking thoughtfully at a book of matches, a red-faced man with a thin body and a big head; he was wearing a sports shirt, and the hair that showed from his chest looked as if he could comb it.

"Got any idea why he wants us?" Simon asked him.

"None." The door opened as he spoke. Two more uniformed men came in followed by Bert Prince and the detective-sergeant. "But we were all at the bank this morning, and the papers are making us look like trigger-happy damfools."

"Hell with them," said Prince, who had approached them. "They're weeping because the money's disappeared. Shooting's news, but losing money's a tragedy."

"Anyway, looks like we're here to get told off," the lieutenant said without seeming to care.

"He usually does that at the regular briefings," said the sergeant, who looked exactly what his title implied: tall, barrel-chested, rusty bristles on his head and upper lip, and a voice that could have cracked his teeth.

"Anything in the reports?" asked Prince in general.

"Yeah," said the lieutenant, "three dead guys, all with histories. If we had the money, we wouldn't even be thinking about it."

"Money," a voice said in disgust.

"Or women."

"Or goddam near anything else, that's the way the glass shatters. Don't let it—"

The captain came in. The uniformed men came to attention, and he waved them back to easy. The others made

room for him to get behind his desk. He was a burly, slow, rhinoceros of a man, with hardly any hair, who looked as if he wouldn't pay much attention to anything. But he had called the meeting.

"You can sit, if you can find a place."

His voice was so soft it made him look almost ridiculous.

"I know it's an awkward time, 7:30, and I could have contacted you individually, but this'll save time. It's about this morning's bank hold-up."

No one moved. He opened a folder and referred to it.

"At 10:58 A.M. an unidentified person, male, called us, probably from an outdoor booth—there's traffic noise on the tape—perhaps close to the bank, to tell us that a robbery was in progress in the bank at the Crown Exchange Building"

He let the fact register, and continued in the voice that could have been giving the parish news.

"I don't believe this caller was a bystander who saw what he thought was a robbery, because even the bank people didn't know it until they were held at gunpoint. It was a tip-off and well-timed it seems. On getting the call, the cars closest to the bank were dispatched, that was Magenty and Augier in 118 and Lemieux and Frechette in 205, detectives Simon and Prince left from here, Lieutenant Hill and Sergeant Latour followed. That's everyone here, and you men were the only officers who participated in the action. Two officers from the traffic division were present but they said they were clearing the sidewalks of people."

Their polite bored faces waited, all that was said so far was a matter of record. But they knew the captain was

elaborating to make a point, formal and getting grimmer as he went on.

"It seems you had just got there, when Constable Frechette saw the one carrying the duffel bag and ordered him to halt even though he wasn't sure he had the right man. At that moment, a shot was fired. It was followed by another and so on. The rest you know."

They relaxed, it seemed there was no point after all, except the shooting which may have been a little sudden.

The captain referred to his papers and said, "Of the eight men on the scene, five say here," he tapped the desk, "that they fired at all, and the total number of rounds was seven. Lieutenant, you say you fired?"

"Yes, sir, once."

"In the course of the engagement?"

"Yes, sir."

"Sergeant?"

"No shots, sir. There were people at the side."

"Detective Simon?"

"One, sir."

"In the course of the engagement?"

"Yes, sir."

"Detective Prince."

"None, sir."

"Constable Augier."

"Two, sir, when things started moving. In the course of the engagement, sir."

"Constable Frechette."

"Two, sir, and in the course of the engagement."

"Constable Lemieux."

"None, sir."

"Constable Magenty."

"One, sir, in the course too."

Dave Simon brought his eyes down to the captain's file and said evenly, "It would seem, sir, that we all fired *after* the shooting started."

"Exactly, that's the first point. The next one is that none of you claim that the three men, Landers, Beelen, and Tone fired first; there may be room for error here, but I don't think so, not if you were following the correct procedure."

They all agreed on that. The office was getting too warm and Lieutenant Hill opened another window.

"The next point," the captain continued meticulously, "is that I want you to think back and see if any of you can be sure you fired at, and struck, the one called Landers. He was the first one to appear, in sunglasses, with the duffel bag, pale grey ventilated hat—"

"I think I did," said Dave Simon, "but I can't be sure where I hit him, I was firing low."

"I fired at him, sir," said the constable called Magenty. "But he was falling then and I missed."

"You had a service pistol?"

"Yes, sir."

"Detective Simon, what kind of weapon were you using?"

"A .38 on a .45 frame, I keep it in the car."

"To complete the check, I'd like you to turn it in to ballistics for comparison with the bullet in his leg."

"Yes, sir."

The captain sat back and scratched the side of his face. They were all silent now, realizing what kind of information was further needed and wondering if it was available.

It was. The captain leaned on the desk and flicked a hand at the papers.

"The bullet that killed Landers," he said, "was fired from a 9 mm. Browning automatic, foreign made, probably Belgian, and it acted like a dum dum in his chest. And we have reason to believe that it was the first shot fired this morning. Or, more likely, the person fired a warning shot first and followed it with the one that killed Landers. We aren't letting this out. Constables, that's all, you may go."

The four men filed out reluctantly; it had been a good demonstration of paper work that paid off.

The lieutenant lit a cigarette, as did Bert Prince; the formality seemed to be over.

"They made millions of Brownings," said the sergeant.

"Oh, the gun's no good to us unless we find it on him," the captain put in. "But it's cleared my men." He stood up and looked out the window.

"We need a lead on that guy," Prince grunted.

"The two that Harry Ormond told us about. One of them might be him."

"Think Landers could have tossed the money to him? On the street, I mean," said the sergeant.

"Possible, but I don't buy it," said Simon. "We were all there to see it, and with us there he would have known it was a tip-off, maybe a double-cross, and I don't see him handing over the money then."

"Besides, what was he doing back at Landers' room?" asked Prince.

"If he was the same guy."

"Yeah."

"A fourth guy must have been in on it," said the lieu-

tenant, "and he must've stayed in the building. It gives out on four streets. If he took off fast enough and stayed in the building long enough, he would've missed the racket. So figuring that, the guy with the Browning went back to Landers' place to look for him. It'd be safe enough, for a while."

"Has to be something like that. It was well planned."

"News'll get around. And the money. We've got the numbers to a lot of it. All we have to do is wait."

The captain turned to them and said, "We won't wait! I want that guy, and I want him known. A gang shooting we can treat like routine. But this guy set us up so we'd do his killing for him. So keep on it until you find him."

His tone was so strong that Dave Simon said, "Yes, sir," and he and Bert left the office.

"Let's talk to Harry."

16.

By 8:30 the street outside was lighted though the sky was still bright. The loud voices passing below reminded him of Harry's and he continued sitting on the bed dully until the reminder went away to be replaced by the thought of whether his eyes were still red; it didn't matter much in here, but he didn't want to sit there and be full of memories he couldn't handle. He could have gone to the mirror and looked at himself, but putting the light on was somehow out of the question; the outside looked bigger this way, and with the light on, there would be no outside, only inside, inside him, and the exhaustion that wasn't keeping

his thoughts at bay. This was as far as the plan went, he had done *his* share, and the rest of it belonged to someone else. The implication of this, which formed itself into the configuration of an expected person, teetered on the edge of his slowly falsifying hopes between the carefully avoided image of the Milt he wanted and the equally avoided truth that would lead to darkness and the image of the Milt he last saw. He felt on the verge of tears again, too pressing to feel ashamed about any more, but tears that brought no relief and only threatened instead to go on forever. They had gone on until he was trembling uncontrollably two hours ago, and he had thought of food to steady him, but it had taken this long to form the decision and to make sure he wouldn't look as if he had been crying.

He stood up slowly and checked his pockets: the key, the money, the knife, his own keys, the sight of which brought everything back and made him hurry to the door.

A blaring red light was on in the hall and over the stairs. As he got to the first floor and turned to take the last flight, he could hear voices in the lobby and laughs, waves of music and the general stir from the bar; closer, he could hear some men singing with the juke-box, and he passed the desk and entered the dining-room.

It was dimly lit, built on the length, and only two tables at the far end had people. He sat away from them partly facing the entrance. A waiter brought the menu and a glass of water and left immediately. The boy drank the water and didn't look at the menu, he'd order steak and french fries when that guy came back and if he knew what he was doing he'd put the steak on a pan that just about burnt your hand and— All this came in a gush of images,

without words, and turned his eyes hot again, and so he began reading the menu which was alien and neutral and promised food he didn't want. He didn't dare look up now until his eyes stopped aching, and he didn't see the man come in.

"Hello."

It finally occurred to him that the word was directed at him. He moved his head from the menu and saw the crumpled jacket of the man who had spoken to him in the lobby.

"Hi."

The man looked young in the dim light; he had a well-fed, clearly defined face that was all the more accentuated in this lighting. His eyes were a pale brown that made them look friendly in an expressionless way; he moved and spoke in an easy but definite manner that again made the boy think of him as happy-looking.

"Are you all alone?" he asked.

"Yeah," said the boy. And trying to look as though he were pleased with himself, he added, "I beat my uncle here."

"Mind if I sit down? Or maybe you don't want company?"

"Sure, I don't mind company. Have you had your supper?"

"Not yet. I just got in from a spin on the lake."

"Do you eat here?"

"Now and then."

"Are you gonna eat here now?"

"That's right, that's what I came in for."

The man stirred to walk away and the boy, after holding out for a moment, said, "Why not eat at this table?"

"OK, why not, eh? Let's say it's my treat."

"I'm all fixed up already. Thanks all the same."

The man laughed and took the menu.

"You probably don't know this place. Don't touch the fish, it's about as close to poison as it'll ever be."

"I've decided what to order," he said twinging with the memory of his earlier engulfment but also feeling he could laugh at the man's remark. When a silence invited more talk, he remembered all the questions he'd been asked by the girl and the strain of lying rapidly and convincingly. It had been simple with her, but this man looked sharper.

The waiter took their orders. The boy hurried to speak first.

"Was it your own boat?"

"Boat?"

"The one you had the spin in the lake with."

"No, I rent it."

"A rowboat?"

He laughed. "No, no, no, a motor-boat."

"Like hooked to the back."

"No," he said, still laughing, "like in the front like a car. A launch."

"Oh."

"You drive some of them standing up."

"A yacht."

"But open, with a windshield."

"Can you go far in it?"

"Anywhere in the lake, and it rambles on for fifteen miles."

"Can anybody rent them?"

"Well, I don't know, not just anybody. Are you thinking of renting one?"

"Me? No. They wouldn't rent one to me."

"I guess not. But the fellows down there'd be glad to give you a ride."

"They would?"

"Well, if you were there at the right time, and they didn't have anything like earning a living to do."

"Do they work with the boats?"

"Only on the tourists."

"You mean rides and stuff."

"That sort of thing. Going to camp sites, looking at the shore line, night cruises when the moon is out, maybe fishing if somebody can pay for the time, business like everywhere."

The food arrived when he was saying this and they began eating. The boy ate tentatively, knowing he wouldn't finish everything and preparing to fall back on the line about being away from home if he got a question about it.

The man ate fast but not jerkily; when they were well started, he said, "Hm-m, finished a swallow and continued, 'I gather the clerk really gave you a bad time, eh?'"

It was completely unexpected, but the boy had time to finish a bite before answering; he let his chewing become something like a small guffaw.

"Yes-s-s," he said heartily and with the absolute security of a person w' o wouldn't even stoop to consider such a thing. "He didn't believe me." He laughed. The sound of it was convincing. He was ten years older; he was now capable of interior dissimulation.

"He still doesn't," the man said.

Easily, he let his surprise and chagrin slide into a huge laugh: "Wait till he sees my uncle." It was said without trouble or twinges of heartbreak. But he knew it would have been different alone.

"He'll question him too. He's much too suspicious for the job, bad PR."

"PR?"

"Public relations. You know, smile at the public, be nice to the guy who's paying. He can't mind his own business. Harmless."

"Not so harmless. He darn near didn't give me a room."

"Oh? What did he think was wrong?"

"I dunno. Said I was a minor."

"Sure, they can't collect."

"So I paid him."

"You had letters, references?"

"Yeah."

A hint of suspicion crossed his mind, but he was already fed up with eating and wishing the man would go, and the hint came to nothing. The man finished rapidly and wiped his lips as a sure sign.

"They make sour coffee," he said and stood up. "I'm going to finish this off in the bar. Thanks for taking company."

"Yeah, well, thanks for being company," he said, and they laughed at the symmetry of the remark.

"By the way, what's your name? We've had a whole meal together without mentioning one name."

"Tom."

"You can call me Ritch if you see me again, no mister.

And you might if you're a swimmer, I'm at the beach most of the time. See you."

"Yeah, see you."

He watched him go, and kept watching to make sure he didn't return. As he did so, he wasn't as relieved as he thought he would be by the man's absence. He had sensed something he could trust in the man, a warmth, a non-curious non-judging attitude, no cross-examining, something. It came like a suddenly discovered escape route on a map, distant and perhaps not to be used, but there all the same: trust, yes, providing nothing had to get told.

The people at the other end of the room looked as if they were finishing, and he wanted to get out ahead of them. The waiter brought his bill, \$3.65, and not wanting to lose his small bills he gave him a twenty which he extracted from his pocket without taking all his money out. When his change came back, he scooped it all up and made himself walk slowly out of the room.

The clerk was just coming off the stairs and turning to go behind the desk; the boy broke stride in an impulse to stop but he continued. The effort propelled him into something that had to be done, for when they were facing each other, he said, even before he knew he was going to speak, "My uncle said I was to go to Ste. Marie's church, can you tell me how to get there, please?"

The words were flat and the "please" wasn't enthusiastic, but the clerk was pleasant in an unaccustomed way.

"Why, yes," he said in a tone that could have been saying: what a good boy you turned out to be. "It's not in the town at all. It's a country church. You take this road out front, and go that way," he indicated the main street

continuing the direction the boy had been travelling, "and keep going for a few miles."

"Thanks."

At the counter near the stairs, he saw the Montreal newspapers, his papers, and stopped. He had cement in his chest as he picked one up. A lower headline shouted, "TRIO SHOT IN DARING—" But his eyes left that fast, there was something else: a picture, right there, with a covered something, and a car, and people, and a cop, and a—

"That's a nickel," the clerk's voice said.

With tedious slow motion, he closed his eyes and folded the paper as if it were smoke, acid fumes: he had made a mistake, boys don't read newspapers. He could feel the clerk's glasses like spotlights, with his panic the target. His fingers rubbed the coin in his pocket. He went to the desk.

"Do you have any comic books?"

"No comic books."

"Oh."

He faked that he was deciding, put the nickel down reluctantly and strolled up the stairs.

First landing, around, up, but he wasn't noticing that, the black core was whirlpooling him: I saw this before, his hand tightened on the paper, it doesn't mean anything, I saw it before, I saw the real thing, and *it* didn't mean anything, and this won't, this, damn, damn, dammit thing, the bastard, he saw me. His venom for the clerk rose anxiously and obscured the other upset briefly. It gave him time to work the key without fumbling and close the door on the oppressive glasses.

He palmed the wall for the light switch, missed it, and

tried on the other side. He had to halt, confused, afraid to turn again like a trapped animal; breathing audibly, he widened the slats of the shade, dropping the paper in the act, and went back to the door. By that time his eyes had grown used to the semi-dark; it was on the door frame above the in-case-of-emergency sign. He flicked it, already in motion to close the shade and pick up the paper which he flipped open on the bed. He didn't notice that the bag had been moved leaving part of its old imprint behind.

TRIO SHOT IN DARING HOLD-UP— SEARCH ON FOR MISSING MONEY

Three men died under police bullets late this morning running out of a downtown bank after holding bank employees and customers at gunpoint while one of them gathered an estimated \$45,000. A heated exchange of shots followed when the bandits and the police clashed on the street. A spokesman said the police were acting in response to an anonymous telephone call minutes before the robbery. The three men were killed in the burst of gunfire.

One of the three let fall a cloth bag which was found to be full of plain paper. The police ordered a complete search for the missing money tying up all the bank's activities and confining all people to the downtown building. "I can vouch for all my employees," manager F. A. Billings said, "and we've even gone through our empty deposit boxes."

It was a very carefully worked out job and there were probably more members in the gang, police said.

The identities of the three men are being ascertained. "They probably all have records," said Det.-Lieut. Hill who is in charge of the investigation. Police have reason to believe—

He didn't read what the police believed or what the bank girls felt like during the robbery; he folded the paper until it was overlapped in three as if ready to be thrown on someone's doorstep, simply placed it in the wastebasket and stood over it. He had not looked at the picture again.

He stared at the basket and had to stare at his knowledge. But he shook his head slightly from side to side as he looked for an explanation. He slipped past the truth, closer this time, and turned off the light. "No," he heard himself breathe out as he said inwardly, it's a trick, they never tell the papers the truth, and what do they know? They'd know how Milt was, they would, and— He was able to keep his eyes dry now, but he knew he should sleep or he'd be out of control again. Somewhere in the unfaced depths of his soul he realized quite clearly that he was trying to alter a fact that would be a fact forever no matter what he willed or how strongly. But his whole person screamed with the effort to do it, it was his only hold on existence; and when the plan ran out and erased all traces of Milt, his hold would go with it. A trick, the scream said, a goddam lie, they want to get to me, want me to go back. How can they do that? They don't know about you. Somebody told them, the papers said three, there were more, they were four, there was Vince, he told them. Told them what? He didn't know about you. He could have found out. No, not from Milt. Then he guessed, damn it, he

guessed, and he told them. Vince told them, told them, told who? How did the cops get there so fast? The image of a casual killer with fancy waved hair made him suddenly careful and broke his verbal buzzing.

He brought the straight chair to the window and sat. His eye must have been resting on the white sink, for he found himself thinking: the refrigerator'd be just there at home. It was no good, he put the chair back, and flicked the light; he'd wash in hot water and sleep right after, that'd take care of it.

He stripped to the waist and automatically opened the suitcase to find a clean T-shirt; Milt's girlie pictures had slipped out of the back flap and rested on the clothes.

As he looked, not knowing what to do with them, someone came down the hall and stopped at his door. An envelope was pushed under the door, the person went away. He tore it open.

"Tom," it read, "one of the guys in the bar runs one of those boats. He said he'd be able to take you out the day after tomorrow. Ritch."

Yeah, he said to himself, yeah.

17.

At 10 o'clock the clerk set out on foot. He didn't want to take a cab around the hotel because most of the drivers knew him and would feel free to ask questions and later remember where he had gone, if it ever came up. And he didn't use his own car because he thought people might recognize it; he considered himself a fairly important man.

By walking fast, he was able to arrive at the beach in twenty minutes and go to the far end where the small wooden piers stopped and the marshy land began.

He had no trouble seeing the launch. It was a clear night, full of stars, and the black form of the boat stood out sharply against the water. He examined it close up to make out the name "Rocket," climbed in about as quickly as he could in a fussy way, and crouched immediately not to be visible from the pier. He had expected that someone would be there, but he found himself alone, getting angry and fearful at having to wait.

Enough time passed to make the crouch uncomfortable and force him to sit on a low wooden ledge and wonder if he were getting his suit dirty. Apart from that he didn't allow himself a movement; the terror of discovery was too great, and he had become quite tense about his errand. Before long, there emerged a black movement along the pier and a man came gradually to the boat. He jumped on and started it as quietly as the minor explosions could be managed. He was short and sturdy, hard to see because of his dark denims, and he kept his back to the clerk.

"Are you—him?" the clerk asked in a dry voice.

"No, I'm taking you."

"That's not what I understood."

"You wanna get off?"

"No. Let's go on."

The man gurgled the boat out quite far and picked a course parallel to the shore line away from the town. Neither of them spoke. The clerk began shivering and shuffled to get warm.

"Stay down."

"I wasn't getting up."

"Well stop moving, or somebody'll spot you. It's simple on a night like this."

He didn't stop his shivering.

"Where are we going?"

"We'll get there."

He wasn't used to being spoken to that way, especially by social inferiors; but it was a small point under the circumstances. Still, they had the advantage under this arrangement, and he was glad he had thought of bringing the hotel's short-nosed .32 with him. Ten minutes later, which he knew by twisting and peering at his watch, he felt the boat turn towards the shore. A barely visible blue light blinked once. They drifted in and bumped a rickety, unused pier that extended quite far into the water and was probably originally intended for fishing from.

"Here. She won't go closer."

The clerk managed to get on the pier; it was made of small logs, and he almost fell over. He waited for the driver to join him, but the boat was already bubbling its way back out. He suppressed a shout and tight-roped his way to the gravel beach.

The bush chirped with nigh' life, but nothing else was happening. He became shrewd then and highly cautious; he didn't move any further or speak, and he knew he'd better keep the revolver secret. About fifty feet from where he stood, he was soon able to discern part of an old beach house; boards seemed to be missing, and one piece of window pane caught the sky. With what he thought was cleverness, he assumed that the man he was to meet

wouldn't want to come out in the open, and he walked towards the shack.

"Behind it," a voice said.

He kept going on an overgrown path, watching the ground, and turned. Something was prodded into his stomach as he almost collided with the man standing there.

"What the hell—? That you Brodson?"

"Shut up and keep your hands out."

The .32 was removed.

"I'll need that back, you bloody fool," the clerk screamed in a whisper. "They'll discover it missing at the hotel."

"You'll get it back. But it makes you look bad."

"It's only for protection."

"Yeah, but I'm the only target. Now you're it."

The clerk put down his arms and said, "That boat. I thought there'd be only you. I don't like having too many people know about this."

"He's alright. And nobody knows about anything yet, not even me."

"Well, it's—"

"Not so fast. How'd you know to call the grill?"

"Like I said on the phone, I heard—"

"Who told you where to call?"

"Nobody *told* me, that is in so many words. I hear the police talk about the place every now and then. They often eat at the hotel."

"Yeah, eh? Which police?"

"Provincial."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, but who? Names, names."

"Two of them, Dufour and Fitzjames."

"OK, they'd know about me. Now why the hell should you wanna see me? You said it was worthwhile over the phone."

"It is. It's big." His voice gathered confidence now. "And I can't handle it myself."

"Alright, go on, go on."

"You know about the bank robbery in Montreal, the one this morning?"

"Yeah, everybody does. So?"

"Well, I know where the money is."

"Like hell you say."

"I can show you, but we'll have to use a light."

"Gimme what you have, I'll go use the light, you stay here."

The clerk gave him an envelope which he had held carefully extended. Brodson took it and rustled through the bush. No light came on anywhere in that direction, but he was back quickly.

"OK," said Brodson. "Three twenties and a newspaper clipping with the serials, they match."

He didn't give the envelope back.

"What's the deal?" he said.

"The money for twenty percent in legitimate money."

"Too high, brother, nobody'd give you that. Take three grand and count your luck."

"Three—?"

"Tops. I'm not holding out, this is a sizzler. Some pretty rough boys are mixing up in this and I'll have to do business with them."

"You will?"

"Yeah, I will. What the hell do you think this is, finders keepers?"

"Keep me out of it to them."

"You're damn right I will, or they cut me out and deal with you. How did you get this and what's the work?"

"The rest I haven't got. I went up to this—guy's room to look around, and I spotted the money and took what I gave you. The papers had the serial numbers and we'll be getting the regular list tomorrow. None of it's in circulation."

"What guy, what room?"

"I'll call you when the time's right."

"Now."

"No." It was so definite that Brodson took it.

"Alright. Make it at night."

"It'll be safe. You pay me first."

"After."

"Very well. Right after. There's a storeroom with a window in it in the hotel lane just off the main street. It's at the back, I'll be there. Take the stuff, pay me, and that's the end of it."

"OK, but take what you get. It's gonna be a hard deal to work."

"Yes, yes, that's all then."

Brodson returned the clerk's revolver and disappeared saying, "Wait for the boat."

In a while a car started and light appeared on the road going away from the town. The chirping and the stars came back with a touch of terror as the clerk stood very still on the gravel and looked on the lake for a black moving object.

18.

I did lock the door, his voice protested to the idea that came to him over an endlessly clear space, I locked it and went to bed. Time passed again and big chunks of darkness re-arranged themselves in his sleeping brain. Somebody's in the room, Milt; Milt, there's a guy at— What the hell, kid, they can't get in here, I moved the trunk over.

Down by a lake the trees moved over as he arrived carrying a tent, but a tent somehow wasn't the right thing and he went back down, just down, where the resources seemed to be and pulled at the blackness for a long time until he had another tent; it was hard going now, his suitcase kept getting in the way and the sun was there giving heat through the dark; he climbed back to where the trees had made a camp site, but they had closed in and this time he had to push them away, puzzled because he could see it all the time as if it wanted him to be tired; and then Milt and Ritch appeared talking together, Milt was explaining something and Ritch smoked his agreement, but they didn't help him even when he yelled to them, and he brought the tent and tried to res but he knew he'd have to go back, how many tents will it take to—? To what? What do you want? Me, Milt, it's just me, isn't that enough? Don't forget the suitcase, eh? Does he know, Milt, does Ritch know? He was opening the suitcase and trying to climb in, thinking that would do it— Do what? —but the sharp-faced woman made a disapproving clacking noise and reached in to take out her sandwiches; he slammed it

shut—that seemed to make Fancy Hair angry—and Milt and Ritch were gone with the tents.

The girls laughed from the pictures on the wall and giggled stupidly because they had run away from home in white cars and he knew Milt was watching them and he didn't want to look at him, don't, don't, Milt. The girls wiggled into a big elevator and disappeared as Milt loaded the big revolver, and once again time became hard black stone that was creaking with strain and extending itself into unseen sharp points that waited in their own darkness for anyone in a hurry. With infinite care and infinite speed inside his mind, he eased past the sharpness and began to wait motionless but feeling like electricity. His suitcase was next to him and he knew there was something wrong with his clothes, they were supposed to be a messenger's uniform but weren't and that gave him a strange sense of error, they were a funny-looking suit he had once worn but couldn't place it now because he was in the corridor outside the bank doors and he was worried that Milt wouldn't recognize him in these clothes especially since he had just gone into the bank without looking at him. Someone said, I've had a lot of trouble with him; it was a woman's voice, naggy and full of resented suffering, and somehow the suit made sense, but he was concentrating on the black time that had become the walls of the bank corridor and being alert not to miss Milt. He just won't do anything right, the woman kept on, you'd think I was a mortal enemy instead of someone giving him a home full of kindness and a home's better than anything else, isn't it, isn't it? He wanted to tear off the suit and rip it till he was foaming with hate, but Milt strolled through it all and he

jumped to attention at the sight of him—this was it, the important moment—needlessly, it seemed, there was nothing to get alert about; Milt gave him something made of cloth, a cap, the cap that he had once worn with the suit; but you didn't give me a CAP, Milt, he screamed into the endless time around him, you gave me a cloth bag, *the* bag, remember? But how come you're here now? Milt! you're here! But all he had was the cap.

He knew he was cursing; he wasn't saying anything but all his strength was going into a long bitter oath that tried to annihilate reality, but reality didn't budge, it retained its shape of the cap in the woman's hand and was being wagged at the social worker, I'm a good woman—yes, Mrs.—and I've tried and tried but it costs too much to keep him on—like hell, like hell, you didn't want *me* anyway, you didn't want me. She pressed the cap into his hand and he ran down the bank corridor, had to hurry now, but stopped and had to decide to plunge into the final homelessness clutching the cap Milt had just given him. Milt, not Milt, it was her; yeah, but it was Milt too, how—? There was no time to figure it all out, bullets were sweeping away the tent and he was covered with the sound of thunderous gunfire. A perfect idea came to him then, and he threw away the cloth bag and all the bullets scrambled for it followed by a continual rush of people; he backed off into his salvaged background, pleased that he had altered such a significant threat, but he backed too far and the plunge had to be taken anyway and he was twisting a huge license plate from his bike as he rode through an indifferently pleasant forest in an effort to reach a highway. You did just fine, kid, where's the money? You said in

four days, not till then, the money, you want it now? Yes, said the clerk, or you can't have the room; but he was only a voice that intruded. The money, kid. I threw it away, you see, and they didn't go after you, they all chased the bag. I made a pass with the hand-off, you're in the clear now, we can run all the way until the white car stops, you'll like her, Milt, she's like the pictures— Where's the money, kid? Sure, Milt, I've got it, I'll see you in four days, I didn't throw it away, I threw the cloth bag away, that's all, and put the money in the cap. What cap was that—? What did you go and do, Milt, getting your suit all dirty on the road?

A storm came up when he was thirsty and the waters rose quietly like smoke and the bus began sinking but he got out through the window, very easily and so pleased that he thought he'd have to remember that trick. There was no fear now because he had received a message, and he had to find the highway with his feet; he knew he could make the water disappear, but he waited for something better than walking and the water kept him up anyway although the sun was a problem. Then the white launch skimmed up to him and Ritch took him aboard and he imagined he looked as happy as the man did. Should I tell him, Milt, now that everything's OK, it doesn't matter if you didn't plan for me, he'll— Behind him, as they gathered speed, he could see the money floating and he was glad. But suddenly he laughed at himself and said not to be silly because the money was in his bag in the hotel room; the waters began to recede as he was deciding to urinate over the side, I've got to go to the john, and besides the door has to be checked, I know I locked it, but you

never can tell, where are we going, Ritch, did Milt—? But he was awake, and searched for something he knew he could never find.

There was no trunk in front of the door, but something told him to look for it and he wondered about it all the time he was in the bathroom. A breeze was rattling something outside, the restaurant exhaust rumbled below, which meant it wasn't too late in the night, and through one of the walls came the sound of the neighbor's shower. From the room he heard someone in the hall, but it was real walking not creeping and he dismissed it. He was too sleepy to give it much attention and the chilly air made him get back in bed. The walking persisted, but he was thinking, maybe I could take one of those boats, but I'd have to know where the lake went to, a guy might skip out clean that way, yeah, but I'd have to leave word for Milt, wouldn't I? With Ritch maybe, no, I don't know him well enough, the post office, sure that's it, and then if the clerk gets too nosy I'll just pull out and wait somewhere else, or keep circling around because then I'd be able to pass by here and the post office and that church Milt said and nobody'd be the wiser because they'd think I was from some camp, say there's an idea if I got a tent and really camped, but I'd need a lot of stuff and I'd have to lug it, hell I can buy it, maybe Ritch'd help, I guess maybe he'd better help because people'd get curious about me camping out in some bloody place all alone and then there's food and maybe it's not too safe to be without a gun and who'd sell me one but they'd sell Ritch one, I'd have to shoot him a line about the money though, say maybe he's got one he can let me have, no that's not such a hot idea,

fact the whole thing's not too good unless it looks natural as hell, and then there's no knowing how long I'll be waiting but by that time I won't care, now why did I get that—? The question was drawn into a jumble of images and words and the world had space again and he was anxious to get going down way-down-inside where things must open out onto a never-ending happiness—

He didn't go far enough: he was in his suit, the one with that cap, and he was at a funeral, his mother's, but he sensed things weren't actual for he remembered burning the suit with Milt when he was out of jail and able to take him from the foster home, but he couldn't leave the funeral now, he clutched his cap and held on to Milt's hand, to hell with all this, kid, it doesn't mean a goddam thing; there was a man with Milt, a man from the reformatory who would be taking him back, I'll be badder'n hell, Milt, until you come to take me out of that place, all she wants is the money for the keep, where'd they find ma? He was closing a door to get away from the suit he'd left behind, he was running and he knew they'd catch him, but that changed to a tunnel where he got different clothes and an escape route that was going to make him free. He fought a thousand barriers and told a thousand lies and then stopped: there was no need for any of it, he was deeper now, he could see peace like a light in the distance. It kept him walking forever.

Milt was waiting all right, he knew he would be, and he wanted to throw his arms around him but Milt didn't like that sort of thing, so he only grinned, ah Milt, is it really you? They gave me a rough time, but I knew you'd be coming, I almost believed they'd killed you back there.

But something was wrong, he could feel it like a sudden shadow on the water, and his soul pressed the question and part of him was ready for an answer —Milt? —Don't be a goddam fool, kid, I'm dead— Why did you get yourself killed, Milt, I just can't imagine it being that way, I just can't Can you do something?

But distortion had already put him back in the boat with Ritch, they were running away, freeing themselves, escaping at last with all things solved the boat roared and fumed and clouds were forming up ahead and didn't look menacing until they realized they were white rocks and the boat was gone The boat was no good, Milt, it was no damn good, it sank This proved to be very funny and they laughed as if they'd done it as a practical joke and he was glad to be with Milt it sank, can I stay with you, Milt, now that I'm here?

4 : Tuesday

Since he was

half expecting it, Dave Simon didn't jump when the phone rang; he awoke and got up from the bed as if he had been lounging on a couch, but his chest thumped and his muscles lacked tone and his watch made sense when it said something after 2 A.M. He crossed the room to the desk—he was a reader—and picked up the phone.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Yeah, me too,” said Bert Prince's voice. “Just walk out when you're dressed, I'll be there. Another phone call, this time we're pacifists.”

“Papers won't like that.”

“See you.”

He dressed with deliberation and no pauses; things moved very slowly and he contemplated the idea that fumbling takes up more time than accuracy, about five or six times more depending on the number of fumbles; if two

fumblers, each with the same brand of shirt, were to— But it didn't seem important any more: he was wide awake, dressed, closing the door behind him and carrying a clip-on bow tie.

Outside, he put the tie on and waited on the apartment stairs. The streets were asleep, the typical Monday-to-Tuesday transition. By the time he noticed the bus floating by and the driver sneaking a smoke, Bert Prince had stopped the car without turning in to the curb.

"A guy phoned," he explained as they rode off, "and asked for Hill, said he could tell us something about the bank job, and asked him to bring a doctor along. On Durham Street, 180, room 6."

"That's not far from Harry's poolroom."

"Hill said the guy could hardly talk, spoke in a kind of whisper."

"Fake?"

"Hill didn't think so."

"Same guy who tipped us this morning?"

"Probably not."

They were there in five minutes. Cars were lined up overnight all along the street, and the squad car was double-parked. One of the uniformed men stood on the sidewalk facing number 180, while the other had the passenger door open on one of the parked cars—it was parked askew—and was using a flashlight in the front seat; he was being careful not to get in. It was all done quietly and no spectators had arrived.

"The lieutenant's gone in," said the policeman on the sidewalk.

"What's here?" asked Prince, indicating the opened car.

The policeman pulled his head out of the car and said, "Blood, like it seeped, all over the driver's seat, the back part. Smears on the wheel and shift. Car's been searched clean by somebody."

"Let's go see," said Simon.

180 was a door to the left of a men's clothing store; it led upstairs to made-over series of rooms that probably tried to fetch apartment-house prices. They went to the back and saw Lieutenant Hill smoking in the doorway.

"He passed out," he said. "Helluva time of night, but he may tell us something if he comes out of it. Nothing else here. Name's Vince Shelly or Chally, couldn't make it out too well."

He led them in.

Vince was lying crosswise on the bed, face down, with his arms spread as though he were chinning himself; his bare back was raspy with still bleeding whip marks. His jacket and shirt were bundled and thrown to the floor; they looked free of blood.

"Must've driven home with his shirt off," Simon said. "Pretty rough after a work-out like that."

"He's got a few on his chest too," Hill said. "He asked me to turn him over when I got here. Passed out, only gave me his name."

"Guess somebody's got that money now," Prince said to no one.

"It's a cinch this guy didn't have it on him."

"They thought he knew where it was though."

"Maybe he didn't talk."

"Nobody's that greedy, or that tough. If he knew, he talked."

Vince twitched on the bed, and Simon, who was closest, knelt next to his head.

"Vince," he said, "you called us and we got here."

He made a series of motions as if he might try to crawl; he had crawled, his pants were ripped and dirty.

"—doctor—?" His voice was soft air between his lips.

"He's on his way."

"—don't touch me."

"No. It's OK. Who did this?"

"—n't hear his name. Guy like with hair-do, was another."

"Sound's like Harry's two," said Prince in the background.

"Where are they?"

"North."

"Where north?"

Vince dragged his hand under his head and opened his eyes; his voice, still in a low whisper, came more evenly by phrases between painful breaths.

"He said Milt used to—operate up north, dunno where."

"Did you have the money?"

"No."

They were all around him now.

"Know where it was?"

"No."

"You were in on the job?"

"Yeah. To tie up traffic."

"Anybody else on the job?"

"No."

"How did the guy who did this find out?"

No answer.

"Vince, did you hear me?"

"Yeah."

"How did he find out?"

"From me. —but didn't know he'd set them up like that."

He couldn't talk properly after that; his eyes watered and ran and he lost his articulation. They waited. Quiet but swift footsteps came from the hall and the doctor entered. He was in his shirt and pants and was wearing his house slippers. He went directly to Vince and felt his wrist, then his neck arteries; working swiftly, he opened his case and held a stethoscope to Vince's neck, but that didn't seem to tell him much. He put a salve very quickly and gently on a portion of the wounded back, placed a gauze pad there and tried the stethoscope again. He walked over to Hill.

"I don't want to turn him over, on that; but I think his heart's bad, we'll need an ambulance."

Hill nodded and left. In a short while, one of the uniformed men came up, and Simon and Prince waited before leaving. Vince was muttering and twitching, his words weren't clear but they indicated he was protesting something. The doctor was easing salve on the rest of his back.

"—the pain—I took it."

Then nothing.

"He's unconscious," said the Doctor. "He might not make it."

"Too bad," said Simon. "Sounded like he made a big discovery."

20.

It was morning. He opened his eyes and it was there, as simple as that, as if a huge impossibility had taken shape during the night. He knew where he was and why, but he felt rested and capable of resisting his feelings: a vague impression of peace clung to a memory, it seemed a fulfilment lurked ahead like a trick knot that could shed its complications. It felt early; there was no human activity anywhere, at least he didn't hear any; birds nagged each other outside his window and the cool air was full of sunshine. When he looked out, he could see the warm slanted light and the long soft shadows of the morning. It was quarter to six. Checking his watch was beginning to remind him that his actions were deliberate after all, that he had asked the clerk for the way to the church, and behind the reminder hung a thousand images ready to inhabit his brain: my uncle said, the way to church, why yes you take this road, that's a nickel, they'll think we're missionaries, kid, the old front, trio shot in—he looked all the harder at the still fresh dawn, it's a perfect day for having fun, with a bike, say, and—but he glimpsed the futility of his joy from a long way off and switched his thinking to the idea of getting into the shower. He hadn't intended to wash, that way, but now it was a welcome project. It ruffled him a little to let the water run on his face again, he hummed to keep his throat unrestricted and he used too much soap so that he'd be busy rinsing.

He dried himself with great sweeps of the big towel, thinking Harry had no showers or anybody he knew and

what a good idea it was to have tubs, but it was handy not to have to lug your clothes into the bathroom. He dressed with long reflective pauses that made him survey the room. Somebody's gonna be in here cleaning up, they'll go here to the bed, the john, they've got no business in the closet but why not look anyway? He took the knife from under the pillow and put it in his pocket, he was ready, but he didn't leave. They come in to clean up, but if there's nothing to clean up they'll go right out, who wants to work at something that's already done? And if they think somebody's here—

He flipped the covers and sheet over the foot of the bed the way Milt had shown him, and brought them back one by one all smoothed out and crisp looking, he overlapped them at the head, fluffed the pillow, and laid out the extra blanket at the foot. At the sink and in the bathroom, he hung the towels as if they had not been used, and opened the window over the shower. The door moved shut in the draft. When he came out, he put the wastebasket—very aware of the newspaper it contained—in the door's way so that it would bump it as it moved. He turned on the radio, low but loud enough to let someone think he'd be inside listening to a low radio. They wouldn't come in to clean, if they did, they'd leave right away. He put the locked suitcase in the closet, closed the door, and looked at it for a while hoping there was a way to secure it. There wasn't. He didn't like to have the wastebasket out of place—they'd think it was being used as a door-stopper—but he decided to take the chance that they wouldn't come in at all. He felt for his key, took it right out, re-

placed it and left the room still double-checking things in his mind.

A snore rumbled over someone's transom on the second floor and an alarm-clock went into a clattery buzz, it wasn't the snorer's; a venetian was zippered open, a voice made the sounds of a question. He began wondering where Ritch might live. From the head of the stairs he noticed an old man in light airy clothes that were too big for him sitting in the lobby working at a newspaper that had been folded to the size of a magazine, the crossword puzzle. As he rounded the stairs and was passing the counter, the clerk's voice reached him.

"My, you got up early."

He tried to look as if he had all the time in the world.

"Oh, always do," he replied.

"Is the room alright?"

"It's fine. You're early too."

"My job. And what are you going to do today?"

"Dunno, bum around, listen to the radio."

"There's a boys' club down the street."

"Oh. I might take a look. But I'd like to be here for when my uncle comes."

"Well, that's what good about hotels, you can leave messages at the desk."

"Yeah, I'll do that. You know a place where I can rent a bike?"

"A bike? No-o-o, I don't think you'd find that."

A big red-faced man with short white hair and a buttoned up sports shirt came to the desk carrying a long narrow fishing case.

"I'll be having breakfast over at the Lodge with the

rest of the party," he almost roared. "Will you ask my partner to bring the station wagon around to there when he gets up, eh?"

"Yes, Mr. Wodfield."

The boy had crossed the lobby and was descending the stairs to the street when Mr. Wodfield lumbered past him and turned in the opposite direction. He hoped the clerk hadn't noticed his exit.

The town was still quiet, not asleep but not out yet. He walked past the closed stores, the bright signs with "SALE" on them looked funnily active with no one around; two women carried luggage from a boarding house to a parked car, they didn't look pleased; a few porches past that, a man in overalls rolled up the garage part of a gas station. He saw the boy and thought something over.

"Hey, you wanna job washing cars?" he said in a weak shout.

The boy shook his head and kept going. He focussed on the long low building at the end of the street where the road turned, and made the signs out as he approached; it was a dance hall. The house next to it was abandoned, the glass out of its panes and the roof off: it was like looking through the eyes of a topless skull. A milk truck shifted around the corner jiggling a 'lot of empties. Children screeched from another street. When he took the turn, he was in the sun and marvelled how cold it had been in the shade.

He went past two blocks of silent houses, a few more scattered buildings; he crossed a street and the sidewalk ended in tufts of tall grass and became a strip of gravel that merged eventually with the edge of the highway. The

road climbed steadily for a while and presented him with a view of itself winding through the hilly countryside; it was there, and real, for anybody who wanted it, but nobody could have it, he felt, for it was disappearing as he walked and would be gone when he was fully in it. He trotted down the slope, it was easier than resisting; a rooster crowed from ambush, and he was walking again by the time he passed a farm path and the dog who was watching him go. A motor, like a truck's, was started and voices came across the fields: people, the workday had begun, the tone of the countryside changed, the road was just something to walk on, and the sun acquired a hard efficiency. He wished for his bike.

About a mile later, a sign said "30 MPH," and he saw a dusty gas pump outside a cluttered machine shop, a store that looked sunk below the road level with a porch that was simply a platform; beyond that a clapboard house. The church was on the other side, a foursquare structure that looked whitewashed and whose doors must have once belonged to another building. On one side of it was a small well-kept house, and on the other across a field was a brick school bordered by a thin strip of finished lawn and flowers and partly hiding a fenced-in school yard. There was no one in sight, but he saw someone moving inside the store. The stairs to the church and the veranda had no railing. He readied himself for a strong pull on one of the big doors, but it came easily and made him stumble back. He went in and closed it softly.

He didn't get further than the back of the church. He had expected to see a vested priest at the altar with his

back to him; he was going to sit and let some of the morning go by. A calm voice was talking.

“—knows the purpose of evil, what role it plays exactly in the development of mankind, what role it played in Christ’s life, or what it—”

There was no one at the altar. The priest, without vestments, was on the left near the communion rail, seated at a little table.

“—but anyone can know the purpose of goodness: simply, to love. Yet sometimes even love can—” The boy moved to the back of the last pew and stood still. “—for our love carries with it our own weaknesses, hate seems to carry our strength. Many a virtuous person hates what he thinks is evil so strongly that it makes him appear strongly virtuous; many people are one sort of Christian because they hate other sorts of Christians so—”

The priest was talking to a small group of nuns; the boy couldn’t make out how many, their black garments fused them into one mass, listening to the sun-beaten round face of the priest. His eyes seemed to carry as far as his voice, friendly eyes, but the boy was avoiding them.

“—what does God want with our petty hatreds? He wants our love, petty as that is, but our love given to Him through the people we love, not an exclusive love of Him through the persons and things we hate in His Name. And our weaknesses? To love is to love with Christ, in—”

His eyes had settled on the boy now, and the boy wasn’t afraid of them. He just didn’t like the fact that the eyes had seen him at all. He waited for a chance to leave.

“There is no hate with Christ, there is anger, yes, and hurt, and disappointment, even a sort of despair, but no

hate. All His emotions seems compatible with love, especially His painful emotions. Even His threats sound like reality's—"

The boy edged to the door and walked out feeling pointless. He had obeyed the plan, that was enough; the smart thing was to keep going. He let the outside door close without a noise, and hurried to get on the road.

His hurry didn't last long. Getting to the church had given him a destination, and a purpose, real even if it was vague, but now he was going nowhere; he had run out of things that had to be done, he had no more instructions to obey, except the one to wait. He watched his feet move and felt the shifting weight of the knife in his pocket, the side of the road trickled by slowly, it would go faster if he had a bike. Where would it go though? Around and around, waiting, something to do, staying around the hotel was creepy, the clerk was too curious. What are you going to do today? Leave a message, boys' club. Yeah, leave a message to let *me* know where you are. Why should he want to know? Afraid of getting gypped, the crummy bastard. He was a mistake that guy, did Milt—? I'll have to get a bike, I can make tracks with a bike, take off, portage it too: he felt himself riding it, the other way, with a sleeping bag rolled up in the front basket, a racer to go fast, but they don't take the weight, this stuff wouldn't weigh much and racers are built for big guys and I'm small and the stuff'd be just about another me sort of, and I could stay out for a long time, the whole summer, but I'd have to land somewhere after that, and people'd ask questions, be easy if I was bigger, wouldn't have to go to school, I'd have to find a school, oh, but Milt'll be able—

he might not be around, even then, the cops'll maybe keep him, he might find somebody to take me, like Ritch, he doesn't know Ritch, but I know Ritch, and I could pay my board, trio, like we did at Harry's, trio shot, but he's no landlord, don't be a goddam fool, kid, I'm—can I stay, Milt, now that I'm here?

A tractor rolled onto the road and sputtered along well ahead of him. He glued his attention to it and watched it finally turn into a farm path. When he came to the spot and passed it, the man was tying mud-caked equipment to the back of it. He kept walking and was alone on the road again. He watched it go under his feet, more and more all the time; he zoomed his eyes ahead and brought the road to him to the particular dusty-black flat spot he was stepping on; it grew familiar and friendly for a moment, only for a moment, for he had nothing to embrace it with; the bike'd make it a friend, so would a place to go, and somebody to go with.

The gravel on the side widened, the squared-off tall grass appeared, and the sidewalk began again. There was traffic now in the town, not much but enough to take it for granted. A bus like the one he'd been on backed out of a wide dirt lane, the terminal he thought; more cars were parked, one had a man waiting in it; a gas truck came out of the hotel's side street and a horse-drawn baker's wagon pulled to the side to let it pass.

He was glad to see the restaurant was open; he hadn't even decided not to have breakfast at the hotel, it was just something he would never do. And he was hungry now. He went in and sat on a stool; his legs tingled, he had walked pretty far; the restaurant clock said 8:15.

A man's head and shoulders popped up from one of the booths.

"You in a hurry?" he said with food in his mouth.

He had a long tanned face and wavy brown hair and bald temples.

"Naw," said the boy.

"Fine, be there in a minute."

A cup clunked and utensils worked; it sounded good. From where he sat, he could see part of the sidewalk and the street in front of the hotel. Nothing was happening. The idleness was broken by an attendant who jerked a station wagon around and parked it across the street. He looked like the one who had brought the radio to the room. About half a block away, a slow-moving man was putting bicycles into parking racks on the sidewalk.

A clatter of dishes being stacked made him look at the restaurant man who came around behind the counter and dumped them into a sink. He was tall and muscular, but looked lanky in the loose white T-shirt.

"Boy, I sure needed that."

He put away the instant coffee and filled a silex with water.

"What are you having, kid?"

"I dunno, something fast."

"I thought you weren't in a hurry."

"Don't feel like eating long Say an egg-nog."

"Right."

He took two eggs from the silvery refrigerator, an aluminum shaker, and broke them into it. He broke the eggs with one hand. When he had the beater going, he asked, "You take vanilla in this?"

"Never mind."

Milk, sugar, a tall thick glass, he passed it over all foaming. The boy had placed a dollar on the counter. He drank as the man got change.

"The way you like it?"

"Yeah, was good, thanks."

He swept his change into his hand, nodded to the man, and left stuffing the money over the knife in his pocket.

The bicycle shop was really a hardware store that sold everything; next to it was a repair section with a sign "Bikes, \$1.00." The new stock had all types, standard, racers, double-bar models, gear-shifts, and up-dated version of his with a bigger saddle. The dealer wore a khaki shirt and pants with a wide belt that caressed a big stomach; he was sniffing into a wad of four or five pieces of kleenex and spitting on the street. He coughed and hawked and said to the boy, "You want something?"

"A bike."

"You do, eh? Which one?"

"Maybe that one." He pointed to the racer.

"You got your parents' permission?"

"Permission? What 'r?"

"For to get the bike, sonny."

"I've got the money. I saved it."

"That means nothing. They tell you to bring it back, maybe busted, and I've got to take it. Get permission and get a license."

"OK, I'll rent one."

"Huh, no-o. You're kinda sm-ll. You get permission."

He went back into the store and busied himself with something.

The boy unclutched the money in his pocket and made his way across the street, around the block, and approached the hotel by the back. His anger hurt.

21.

Simon had his coat off and sat smoking. Prince just listened. The speaker on the portable tape recorder was defective.

‘—shuffling feet and a bed creak followed by the clicking of some sort of instruments—

—OK, you can talk to him, not too long.

An intake of breath of a person preparing to speak.

—Vince, where did these guys take you?’

“That’s the captain,” said Prince.

“I don’t like these gimmicks.”

“Somebody took it all down you can read it if you want, when they’re through with the copies.”

‘—Out of town, across the seaway bridge.

—Mercier bridge?

—Yeah.

—Then where?

—Dunno, kept turning.

—Could you see?

—Yeah, could see.

—Route signs? Garage names? Billboards?

—I was scared.

—How long did the ride take?

—Can’t be sure, over a half hour maybe.

—What place did they get to?

—Looked like a garage.

—Gas station?

—No, garage, like a barn maybe.

—Nothing painted on it, no name?

—No.

—Then what?

—They asked me about the money.

—How many guys?

—Three.

—All right, one was this guy with the done-up hair, the other was the big boxer type with the black hair and heavy eyebrows. Who was the third guy?

—Little guy, in overalls, he kept giggling.

—What did he look like?

—Didn't see him. They had one light, on me.

—Did you ever see these men before?

—Yeah, the first two. Saturday, before the action, they were gonna work me over, behind Milt's place, and—I told them, should never have told them.

—I told them what?

—About Milt's plans.

—Did you tell anybody else?

—No.

—Do you know where the money is?

—Would I be here?

—Did you see these men outside the bank?

—The big boxer guy. Came in to my heap after the action, thought they'd slipped me the goods.

—We were right there, you could've saved yourself a lot of grief.

—Sure. Like Milt.

Silence.'

Simon hissed the smoke out of his mouth.

"It's not worth a goddam thing, but I'd like to tell that punk we didn't gun down Landers."

"Don't waste it."

'—a paper was rustled, a chair dragged along the floor, more breathing—

—Where did these guys go up north?

—Dunno. Place where Milt did business.

—What business?

—Dunno.

—Do you know any of Landers' pals?

—No.

—Did you ever hear anybody talk about him?

—No.

—Don't dummy on us, Vince.

—Still no.

—Nobody ever spoke of Landers?

—Well, here and there, nothing solid.

—They mention him and his kid brother?

—Wouldn't know, maybe.

—Who would've mentioned him, for instance?

"He's really fishing," Simon said.

"Useless."

"Maybe not. One name and we might get lucky."

'—Dunno.

—Did you know the boy?

—No.

—Where was Landers sending him?

—Summer camp somewhere.

—Where?

—Dunno.

—How did you come to meet Landers?

—Through a friend. Milt was looking for talent.

—What friend?

Silence.

—Come on, come on. What friend?

—I'm not chicken any more, cop man, do your own work.

—All I want's one guy, the guy that put you here. You're not stooling on anybody.

—You want to find the take.

—That too.

—Why the horseshit about finding the guy that did this to me?

—Not for you, Vince, for me. That guy shot Landers.

—You're a f—— liar I saw it.

Another voice said:

—Easy. He can't take it.

Noises of people moving about, followed by the hiss of clean tape.'

Prince turned off the machine.

"Hill tracked down that garage as soon as it was daylight," he said. "He found the guy in the overalls, but he didn't know anything, he said. No trace of anything. He's still sticking with that story."

The intercom buzzed and Simon opened it.

"Captain's office," said Hill's voice.

They went to it.

When he saw them, the captain said, "Shally didn't get to see these." He indicated the mug shots on his desk. "Five possibles on each man. He died before I got back to him."

"Too bad."

"Much too bad. But we'll try the same set on that giggler we picked up this morning. These you'll take with you."

Simon scooped them up and asked, "Where to?"

"We've had a break. A bill with a number from the bank's list, a twenty, in Val Laurent. Teller at a Dominion Bank branch spotted it. But apparently he can't back-trace it."

"Must've been passed yesterday," said Simon. "That's pretty close timing, whoever passed it might be miles away."

"There's one thing that's gonna help you though, he's stupid enough to leave a trail. Look up Fitzjames at the Provincial Police detachment, he's handling it."

They left after Simon got his jacket from the other office.

"We'll grab a bite on the road," said Prince.

"Or up there'd suit me better. We won't need that kid now, looks like our friend with the hair found the money after all."

"Maybe," said Prince. "Figure the timing."

"Yeah, he'd be passing it around the time we got to Vince."

"I'm not convinced."

"All we need now is to find out that the bank teller made a mistake."

The man called Ritch pushed his collins forward on the table and ran his finger through the wet trail. As he did

this, he looked carefully past the bar entrance into the hotel lobby; from where he sat he could see part of the display counter near the desk. Anyone entering or leaving the hotel or going upstairs would eventually pass into his line of vision. The drink was there only to justify his presence. He had watched the after-lunch activity slow down, and had blended with the stragglers in the bar while he waited to see the clerk go out and leave the lobby empty.

No one passed in the section he was looking at, and he couldn't hear anything over the talk of the three men a few tables away. The clerk could have gone out the back way. To make sure he would have to go into the lobby and get cigarettes from the machine. But this could only be done once, and he was saving the action. To be seen twice getting cigarettes would arouse the suspicions of anyone who noticed, and the clerk noticed everything.

He would have to move out of the bar soon. He didn't want another drink; he didn't drink much, it always lessened his caution, and the low key excitement he was already feeling could make him careless. The talk of the three men at the other table dropped suddenly. They got up and made their way to the exit. Ritch reached for his glass and sat back looking bored. When they were gone, he realized he was the only one left, not yet conspicuous, but sure to be noticed by the bartender unless he ordered another drink. It was time to go. Looking for cigarettes, he felt his pockets, stood up, and walked out.

The clerk wasn't there, and the lobby was empty. He stopped anyway in front of the cigarette machine, as though he believed his own pretense, and went quickly up the stairs.

As he came closer to 313, his excitement pulsed in his chest and promised to quiver his body; he wondered if he had chosen a correct moment. A friendly call now couldn't possibly upset the boy; and if he waited too long, events might scare the boy away. But this wasn't the time for thinking, he was at the door. It wouldn't do to turn back, perhaps he heard, perhaps he discovered walking down the hall, in stealth, past the point of explaining: was that you? why didn't you come in? you knew it was my door because last night you left a note.

He didn't move. A male voice was chattering in a strained regularity beyond the door. This changed things. He had decided to move away, but the voice was replaced by gushing, magnified guitar music: a radio, and a disc jockey. The door took on an air of pleasurable leisure; on the other side of it a boy was whiling away a warm afternoon listening to hit tunes. Yet it all seemed out of place. Swimming would be more in character, with a transistor radio to supply the tunes. Over the music came the sound of the floor squeaking, a thudding—was the boy dancing? limbering up after a shower? Silence followed, then an unidentifiable sound, and the rustling of paper. In one motion, Ritch knocked casually on the door, flipped the knob and walked in.

The clerk sprang backwards and gaped with fright.

On the floor the boy's suitcase was open. In it, with the other things, was a cloth bag, closed and full of something. Beside the suitcase was a large paper shopping bag, still open, with something in the bottom.

"You," the clerk said breathily, and looked a little relieved.

Ritch closed the door quietly. He took a step over to the paper bag and looked into it without stooping: it held money and cut newspaper.

"Is the boy here?" asked Ritch.

"No."

"What are you doing here?"

Ritch's question was friendly, as though the clerk could answer that he was here on fire inspection.

"I was checking up on the boy," he said. He scooped up the paper bag, folded the open end as far as it would go, and held it under one arm. "Everything seems to be all right."

He put the paper bag on the bed and went back to his work, arranging the contents of the suitcase, locking it from a ring of small keys, and putting it back in the closet. The music on the radio mocked his movements. Ritch went over to the bed and picked up the paper bag.

"We'd better go before—" the clerk was saying, but he saw that Ritch had the bag.

"Give me that!"

"What's the boy involved in?"

"Involved in? I don't know," said the clerk trying to fight back his fear, "I don't know. Give me the bag, it's— it's evidence. The police will want that, it is—"

"It's your bag, not the boy's."

"I know, I know, but what—?"

"Why the substitution, if you're going to the police?"

"I don't want the boy to know we're on to him."

"On to him for what?"

"Nothing. Just a precaution."

Ritch held the bag more firmly and made a step toward the door.

"I guess we'd better bring this to the police," he said.

"No!" said the clerk in a suppressed shout. He struggled out the hotel pistol and held it awkwardly and shakily. "Give me the bag!"

Ritch backed away from the trembling gun and gave up the bag.

"Let's get out of here," hissed the clerk. He fumbled the gun back into his hip pocket, clutching the bag like a doll, moved into the hall after Ritch and locked the door.

In the corridor of the next floor, the clerk stopped and said to Ritch in a panicky voice, "There are people in this who could kill me, kill you, do you hear?"

"That's your affair."

"It'll be your affair if you say anything about this."

"If I say anything," said Ritch. "I might not."

The clerk waited a while and said in a less nervous way, "How much do you want?"

"Nothing," said Ritch.

The clerk became suspicious; he sneered through his nose, and his look repeated his question.

"Nothing," said Ritch again. "Just make sure you keep the boy out of it."

The clerk grew more self-possessed as his cunning returned. He looked at Ritch with a sort of understanding surprise.

"You don't want part of this?" He squeezed the bag.

"No. That's all I have to say. I'll—"

"And you're not going to the police?" He couldn't keep his face from showing how pleased he was becoming.

"With what? It's none of my business."

"Oh? Well, just what are you getting out of this?"

"Nothing."

Ritch tried to break away, but the clerk grabbed his arm.

"Nothing except the boy, eh?" The clerk was sure enough of himself to afford a part-smile. "That's why you were up there?"

"That boy," said Ritch as indifferently as he could, "has paid quite a hotel bill. You won't be throwing him out for a long time."

It was a minor point for the clerk. He put on the same half-smile and walked away towards the back stairs.

Ritch went back to the bar. His drink was still on the table, the interminable episode hadn't taken very long; the bartender nodded to indicate he had left it purposely. Ritch remembered to light a cigarette. He took a long time finishing the collins.

When he had thought things out, he went to the phone booth in the bar. He dialed slowly, confirming a decision with each stroke, and waited as his number rang. He knew it would take long.

Finally, a receiver was lifted at the other end. No one spoke.

"Matt," said Ritch.

"I'm listening."

"This is a friend." Ritch was sweating.

"A-a-ah, isn't that like friendly? A fr-r iend," the voice said in a mocking falsetto.

"You don't have to do that," said Ritch before he heard how helpless he sounded.

"I don't have to do anything. What's the wire open for, friend?"

"Not that, something else."

"You got the wire, go ahead."

"Never mind. I think I was wrong."

"Oh, oh, oh. Like you're gonna tell a friend, or I'll come visiting."

"Alright. The clerk at the hotel, the Manoirs, is on to something with money in it. That's all I know, but if you—"

"We've heard already. There's big talent dancing around that pile. You're not thinking of joining the circle, eh?"

"No. Just thought you could use it."

"You don't like the clerk?"

"Just count it as a favor."

"I'll be counting, oh fr-r-riend, will I be counting. Did the clerk brush you?"

"I have to go."

He hung up on the laughter. He was wet throughout, choking on a futile hatred. Cool air gushed at him when he opened the booth. It would pass, he'd be all right in a little while, some day it might be all right all the time. He decided not to have another drink.

23.

The boy sat on one of the red benches under the trees and looked out on the beach. It began as gravel a few feet away from him and changed to sand that stretched around the

wide bay and probably continued after that. He wasn't interested. He was alone where he was, it wasn't really beach. To his left, within reading distance of the signs, was an open-air dance floor with a small rail that held a continuous wooden seat and had reminded him of a platform for a band. The park-like area where he was sitting seemed to be part of the dancing facilities, but he couldn't make the connection. Far to his right were the changing cabins and what must have been the best swimming spot because most of the people were there. A lot of them didn't use the cabins, they had driven up already wearing bathing suits.

Their noise reached him clearly, screeches, and splashes, and laughter; the sustained gaiety made him tense. It had grown imperceptibly. He was all alone at first eating a take-out sandwich and draining a soggy carton of milk. It was a good idea, nobody wondered why you were there; it was better than being in the hotel room and it wasn't tiring like walking. The people had started arriving, intent on the water and missing him completely, and the sounds of fun replaced the hot stillness of the sand. A few couples with blankets came to stretch out by the trees. He knew they wouldn't talk to him or call him over; and it was a sunlit afternoon, so they wouldn't send him on his way.

He had brought his swim trunks along; they were just a prop now, he wouldn't be going in: there were too many people and too much shrieking happiness on the beach, a not-quite-for-real enjoyment into which he could never enter; it meant going in the same as naked with his clothes left behind and his money and his knife and the key to his room. A swim promised a kind of buoyant peace, but not

here; here, for the risk, he could only get the insensitivity of a good time.

Beyond the raft on the lake an outboard moved smoothly out of line with the swimmers and disappeared behind the dance floor; the boats tied up on the other side of it, he could see stairs going down from the pavilion to the lake. He wanted to go over and look, but he couldn't justify his presence there, it wasn't like watching people at the beach. He could stay here till supper and even later than that in another spot: he'd have to move around because sooner or later somebody'd notice him always there. "What's the matter, kid, afraid to get wet? Cat got your tongue?" A bike would've fixed all this, you can move anywhere on a bike, stop and straddle it and look places over and take off, especially with another guy nobody pays any attention at all, you could even come and watch them dancing here at night, two guys, with bikes, but not one guy walking; maybe get to another town, the bus is no good, you wait for it and get stuck in it and can't get off, to hell with that guy and his bikes, there must be another place where they sell them, he looked like an old cop too, maybe if I got me a paper route he might listen— He had come too close to the edge again, and he went back to watching for boats. But this time a fact had hung on to his awareness: he knew he shouldn't let himself dream anymore, dreams always gathered up the momentum of the past, like an old habit, like home; he'd have to think instead of dream, but he didn't know how he'd ever turn off the activity in his brain.

A car honked behind him on the road near the dance pavilion. He let it go, no one would be honking for him.

The third time he was nudged into turning around. Ritch was already moving, coming around from the driver's side where he had been standing. He walked slowly, like a strong man idling, and the strength was emphasized by the white T-shirt and slacks. He looked amused.

The boy held his gladness in check and didn't spring up from the bench; he stayed twisted until Ritch reached him.

"Hi there, Tom. I thought it was you."

"Hello, —Ritch."

Ritch looked at him, still amused, and saw the swim trunks.

"You thinking of going swimming?"

"Huh no," said the boy. His eye caught the empty carton of milk, it had been empty for well over an hour. "I just had something to eat. I brought these along in case I felt like it."

"Don't tell me you've been here all afternoon?"

The boy was going to deny it, but there was a chance Ritch might ask where he'd been, and he didn't want to lie to him unless it was necessary.

"Yeah, most of it, I guess, hanging around. You know."

"Uncle's not here yet, is he?"

"No."

"You'd think he'd send you a message or something, to let you know. I mean then you wouldn't have to wait around, you could go places."

The boy thought it over. He couldn't decide if the man was asking or questioning.

"He's not like that. He just tells you to do something, and that's it."

"Do you know anybody around here?"

"No, my uncle does."

"Things must get pretty draggy."

"Yeah, it's draggy. I tried to get a bike this morning, but the guy wouldn't let me have one."

"Oh, why not?"

"Said I needed permission."

"Whose permission?"

"My parents." The word sounded mysterious to him.

"Did you have the money to rent it?"

"Sure. I had the money to *buy* it. Said my parents'd kick and he'd have to take it back, real suspicious, like that guy at the hotel."

"Couldn't you phone them?"

"Phone who?"

"Your parents."

The silence in his head cut off the noises from the beach. The mysterious parents flew through his imagination looking for a shape that could become a good lie; they'd have to have a phone, especially if the uncle was a big shot; but if they were well off, the uncle wouldn't be paying for the vacation; maybe they were pals, but he hadn't made them sound like pals; and if the parents were away, he'd have to be away with them; divorced, maybe, separated, family troubles, no, Ritch is not that goofy dame in the car. The best lie is a piece of the truth.

"I've got no parents."

It sounded solid, and made more sense of the uncle; it was meant to be a lie; but under the truth it contained, now that it was out, he felt drawn to Ritch.

"Oh," said Ritch.

He sat down and took the time to light a cigarette before he spoke again.

"Let's leave it there, eh?"

"OK."

He was relieved. No more questions about it. Ritch's statement had given him his interior privacy as though they were both grown men.

"You here to go swimming?" asked the boy.

"Me? No." He laughed. "I was going down to the boats on the other side. I never swim here."

"You don't?"

"Look at it. Noise and more noise. You wouldn't be able to hear yourself drown."

The boy half grinned.

"It put me off," he said, "all these people, and I didn't go in." He was glad they agreed about the beach, he wasn't going to be forced to swim here by an invitation he couldn't refuse.

Ritch snapped the cigarette away in a long arc to the sand.

"Well," he said, "I'm going to find a boat."

"You going for a ride?"

"Yes. Would you like to come? It's something to do."

"Sure. It's better than this."

They walked to the car and the boy stood aside while Ritch parked it in the shade. He didn't lock it.

"You gonna leave it like that?" the boy asked.

"Nothing to take, except the car."

They went along the gravel, past the long front of the dance pavilion, and down a flight of worn wooden stairs. The beach on this side was a series of wooden piers where

the launches were moored, stretches of sand holding row-boats tied to a single pipe that looked like a low rail, boat-houses further down that had been built on the water and had piers of their own, and a long narrow shed, like a group of hotdog stands, that contained equipment for water sports. On one of the piers, an older man, stripped to the waist and reddened so much he looked in pain, was working on a dismantled outboard, his fishing tackle was spread out next to it. Away from the water was a barn-like garage, unpainted, with a dirty gas pump in front of it. There were men inside, and some kind of motor was vibrating. Ritch walked over and spoke to one of the men. The man rubbed his hands on his pants and disappeared. When he came back, he gave Ritch a key and pointed towards the boats. They spoke awhile and Ritch started across the beach, the boy joined him, stuffing his swim suit into his back pocket.

The boat was a large flat launch, battered and painted white, that had been converted to take as many passengers as possible. It had a spotlight, a triangular red flag on each side of the stern, and a buggy-whip antenna that probably picked up the hit parade and the weather for tedious fishing trips.

"Can you get that front line off?" said Ritch, and slid down behind the wheel.

The boy jumped on the hood and worked the line loose. He threw it on the pier and climbed along the side of the windscreen and into the front seat. The motor ground out a few refusals and then banged into life as if it were going to fly. Ritch subsided it, chugged the boat out and around, and pointed it to go past the other beach.

The boy was silent. He had expected to be thrilled, and everything was there to be thrilled by: a lake full of quasi-dangers, the boat pressing its power through the water with Ritch handling it in bored confidence, the movement, the space, the thousand points to be reached, the easily had daydream of exploration, everything; everything except his capacity to respond to it. It all pulled at him, invited him, and he had nothing to bring to it but a detached interest. He had simply taken it for granted that it would be fun; and now, without warning, his joylessness hinted at how deeply things had changed.

"First time?" asked Ritch.

"Yeah."

"Scared?"

"No."

The beach looked small and safe even only this far out; the louder noises reached them, weakened and devoid of threat; the people seemed huddled together against the untrustable water, darting and scurrying into the heavy sunlight as if they were getting away with something. The shore line changed to trees and bush, and broke into clearings where summer cottages emerged like shacks at first and spread later into landscaped places, like city houses, that defied the countryside.

"Not much to it, is there?" asked Ritch.

"It's alright," he said. "The ride's fine."

"Are you sure? We don't have to stick it out, you know."

"No, no. It's alright. I'll just do what you do, Ritch."

"You tired?"

"No, no."

"What did you do all day?"

"Nothing."

"Tired of doing nothing, eh?" Ritch looked at him and laughed lightly.

"Yeah. Not much doing in hotels."

"Not for boys. The bar's for adults, but even that's not too exciting. The clerk say anything more to you?"

"Naw. He was nice as—"

"—as hell."

"Yeah, that's what. He was nice as hell this morning. But he only wanted to know where I was going, said I could leave messages for my uncle."

"Just snooping. You had nowhere to go anyway."

"I did, but I didn't tell him."

"You don't tell people like that anything." A pause, and Ritch asked, "Did you make any new friends?"

"Friends? Where?"

"Where you went this morning."

"Really didn't go anywhere. Just to a church, on the highway, my uncle said to go there, he knows the place."

"A church?"

"Yeah."

"Your uncle religious?"

"Yeah, guess he is."

Ritch laughed and watched where the boat was going. The lake had narrowed into a wide stream and was opening up again with a sweep that must have extended over a mile.

"It's all like this," Ritch said. "It goes for miles, but you can't pass in certain places. With this boat, that is."

He followed the bending shore and took a wide turn back.

"What's up there?" the boy asked, pointing to where they had not been.

"More of the same. Less houses. Quite far down there's a boys camp."

"Is it big?"

"Big enough, I guess. You planning on going to one?"

"Well, I was, sorta. But I'll have to see what my uncle says. I thought he was gonna send me to one. I'm not so sure now."

"You in any trouble? With your uncle I mean."

"Trouble?"

"Well, that's a big word. I mean did he promise that to make you get good marks in school or something?"

"Oh, he didn't say exactly. Might have been it."

"You want to drive?"

"The boat?"

"Sure, the boat. I'll show you, it's easy. Hold the wheel."

Ritch stepped over the seat and stood behind it.

"Move in."

The boy got behind the wheel and sat up as straight as he could to see where he was going. Ritch held the wheel with him.

"Just don't turn it fast. Now when you do turn, it'll turn easy and slow. So don't try to hurry it by turning the wheel all the way. OK?"

"Yeah, yeah. It's fine."

Ritch climbed into the passenger's seat and lit a cigarette. The boy looked too serious to talk. Ritch smoked and watched him drive.

"Is it deep here?" the boy asked.

"Deep enough."

"Any rocks?"

"No, not here. Just keep the nose," he leaned over to point, "in line with that peak over there, see it?"

"OK, I got it."

The lake looked new to him now, a cluster of directions that could go anywhere he chose. It wasn't fast though, but it was quiet, and nobody'd know where you were going, and a boat like this could carry a lot of stuff, like camping things, better than a bike.

"Can you see at night on the water? I mean using a boat like this."

"If there's a moon, or if it's a bright night. Landing's tricky."

"This light any good, if there's no moon?" He nodded to the spotlight.

"Some. It's better to have markers shining where you're headed for."

It could be done at night, easy, if you picked the right night. But you'd have to have a boat to begin with, and nobody'd sell a boat if they wouldn't sell a bike, and it takes a lot more money, more than a guy'd be able to save and have 'em believe it, besides the lake stops after a while, and maybe it's better on the road, it'll be a long time before I'm big and make people mind their own business, or before Milt gets—he'd want me to take off, smart like, and keep moving, will he know though where he is? What if it's true? What if what's true? There's nothing to ask about, nothing, just nothing.

"You're a little off course."

"Oh, yeah."

He gave the wheel a short gentle turn and waited for

the boat to come in line. He could see the town beach in the distance, looking less hot now that the sun was beating on his neck from behind.

"There's more of them now over there," said Ritch.

"It's hot."

"That brings them out."

"Where do *you* go swimming, Ritch?"

"Oh, a few miles over."

"Is there another beach there?"

"Yes, a small one "

"Is it crowded?"

"Not a bit. It's mine."

"You mean you own it?"

"That's right."

"You own *a beach*?"

"Sure. Stay on course. It's on my property, I own it. Not big but it does fine."

When they were in line with the beach, Ritch said, "I'll take it," and helped the boy climb out of the seat. He steered past the pavilion, circled in to shore, and idled the boat close before cutting the motor. The boy jumped on the pier without being told and got the bow secured.

"Real sailor, eh?" said Ritch with a smile, and inspected the knot.

The boy looked at him, pleased, but he was already thinking that he'd have to leave, go back to the hotel, and eventually find a place to have supper. They walked along the wooden pier and onto the gravel towards the dirty gas pump. Ritch stopped and played with the boat key.

"Look, Tom," he said, "I dunno what you've got your mind set on doing, if you want to go back to the hotel to

wait, for instance, but—huh—I'm going swimming, over at my place. If you want to come, it's alright."

"Yeah, I'd like that."

"Fine then, go wait in the car. I'll go pay the man."

"Yeah."

He broke away in a fast walk that became a run, he dashed up the wooden stairs in two strides and brought himself past the dance hall before he took to walking again; he didn't want anybody to think he was sneaking fast into the car. This was good, and it felt good, he was going to a definite place, he had been asked: if it was all played smart, it might work out. He clucked it open.

The car was warm even in the shade, but he didn't notice it as a nuisance; he was glad to be in it. He held himself in, with his hands on the seat, and looked at the powerful dashboard. It gleamed and promised to explode and had the energy to go forever. Dream, dream, don't dream. He hadn't felt so joyful since a morning ago and more; he gave himself to it and detected, just in time, a rising impulse to share his joy with Milt. He turned in the seat, deliberately, to see how big the car was and saw Ritch approaching in a leisurely walk.

The door opened and closed with a masterful sound, and Ritch created strength by sitting behind the wheel, inserting the key without a lost movement, and letting loose the controlled power of the engine. He had simply started the car, but to the boy it was as if he had bestowed existence upon it. The short handle on the wheel was pulled down a little and the car moved ahead with a slight bump; it was that easy, for Ritch.

He rolled the car off the beach grounds and through a

quiet part of the town that didn't seem to know that vacationers existed. Before long they saw the traffic on the main street and Ritch turned away from it.

"We'd go that way, if it wasn't so jammed," he said. "Know where you are? We'd be passing in front of the hotel that way."

The boy nodded, but already they were in the back streets.

"A lot of traffic this time of day," Ritch continued. "They leave work early in Montreal and can get here for an early supper. The ones who can afford it, that is, the others sweat it out."

He laughed at his observation.

"Are you from Montreal?" the boy asked.

Ritch turned a corner before answering.

"From, yes. I spend all the time I can up here. There's the highway up ahead, we've circled the town."

When they turned at the intersection, the boy noticed that the sidewalk ended and the road started to rise; it was the highway he'd been on in the morning. Ritch made the car go fast, up the slope and down the other side, the tires making a wet hum; there was hardly time for the boy to recognize the siding where he had watched carefully for dogs and the asphalt he had almost memorized. After what seemed a long while, because he thought it would be sooner, they passed the 30-mile speed sign and the huddle of stores, church, and school that had been the end of his walk. They were in new country now, but Ritch looked so unconcerned that the boy felt safe and didn't bother to examine it too closely; the car tamed everything with

heavy speed, danger was something behind you and nothing stayed in front for very long.

"Lake's in that direction," said Ritch and indicated the left side of the road. "We're really turning away from it."

"You come far."

"Just feels that way. It's not that far."

"Do you ever go by boat?"

"No, you can't get through on this side of the lake. That's just fine, keeps the place quiet."

The siding changed from farmland to dense undergrowth and the road kept a level course through hewn rock sections like uncovered tunnels. When it looked out on fields again, a speed sign appeared and Ritch let the car lose momentum. He braked and took the dirt road to his left; he kept braking until the car stopped bouncing and found a steady speed.

The ride seemed longer now. They passed slowly through the fenced-in bush, the timber side of the farmland to their right. The lake appeared through the small trees. They passed another smaller road that led down to it by forming an awkward turn; three home-made signs had barely legible names on them. After a stretch of dense bush that hid the lake, bigger trees began to appear, and the water, and finally Ritch turned into what looked like another road but proved to be a long wide arc that was a driveway. Within the arc the wild growth had been untouched and it shielded the cleared section completely.

Ritch stopped the car with a soft jolt, turned off the motor and didn't bother taking the keys. He laughed and said, "Here it is." They got out.

A stone path began at the trees that bordered the drive-

way and went to the back door of the cottage and around on both sides. The grass between the trees had been cut but not trimmed, and the rest had been left to grow. The cottage was low and wide, with an overhanging roof and a stone and cement foundation that looked as if it had first been meant for a farmhouse; the sides were finished in half logs, reddish brown heavily coated to fight the weather, and broken by long narrow screened windows.

The boy looked at it and walked slowly up the path. Ritch was waiting with the back door open.

"Is this yours? I mean all of it?"

"That's right," said Ritch casually.

"It's a real house. I mean it's not a--"

"—a shack?"

"Yeah, not a shack, or a cabin. You know."

When they went in they could see the lake through the two large front windows and double doors that gave on to the veranda. They were in a large hall-like room, flanked by two rooms on each side, that formed an open T with the front of the cottage; to the left was a kitchen and to the right a section with bookshelves to the ceiling. The furniture looked placed accidentally, two red leather sofas that faced the lake, wicker chairs, scatter rugs, a table like a butcher's block, a TV set between the door and the window in the corner with the books.

Ritch laughed at the boy who couldn't take it all in fast enough.

"It's better than a city house."

"Well, some," said Ritch. "Doesn't your uncle—?"

"He's too busy to have a summer place."

"Oh. I mean what's his city house like?"

"It's not a house, only an apartment." He had never been in an apartment to live, only to collect on his paper route. Quickly he looked at the books to avoid the subject.

"You got a lot of books. Are you a teacher?"

"Huh, no, not right now. I was, for a while. It's going to get late soon, we'd better have our swim. That's what we came for."

Ritch turned on a gas water-heater that was anchored to the kitchen wall.

"Shower in here," he said and knuckled the wall of the adjoining room. "I always use it after a swim, makes me feel less like a fish." He laughed.

The boy half wondered if he should change in the bathroom, but Ritch already had his T-shirt off with the unconcern of an athlete in a dressing room. The boy did the same. He sensed the absence of jokes, like Milt's, and horseplay, but he had gained experience at not dwelling on reminders. Ritch tossed him a large towel and they went out by the veranda.

The beach was wide and long, ending abruptly quite far down along the shore where a mangle of branches stretched out over the water. A rowboat was tied to a tree by a long rope, and a small raft was anchored at a comfortable swimming distance. Behind it was water and the rolling humps of short trees on the other side.

"It gets deep near the raft, especially for you," Ritch said, "but a good dive'll get you back into pretty safe water."

He ran and flapped in. The boy did the same and got a good leap. The water was cooler than he had suspected, and he wasn't going as fast as he was used to. It was hard

to get more vigorous; he tried to relax but it bothered him that he had lost verve since the last time he swam. He went underwater for a few well-controlled lunges and came up making a huge effort to go fast. Finally he was moving as he wanted; Ritch was lagging behind, he didn't seem to be much of a swimmer. The boy made the raft easily and waited for Ritch.

"Pretty good," said Ritch out of breath. He climbed on to the raft.

"I can swim across the lake."

"That's far, a little under a mile."

"I did twelve lengths in the pool once and I wasn't tired, and that was going all the time, no treading."

The effort of swimming had made him forget everything else, he talked faster and less guardedly.

"How big was the pool?"

"Oh, it was big enough alright, one of the indoor ones. I couldn't do it in the big one like they have at the natatorium. That's really long."

"Twelve lengths, eh?"

"That's right. My brother saw me."

He said it almost as he was diving, a carefree over-the-shoulder remark. He kept in motion, sprang, hit the water, and came up looking at Ritch and pretending to get in position for a backstroke. Ritch watched idly. The boy swam to shore and sat down on the sand. There'd be questions when he went back, and he'd better go back before long or Ritch'd be figuring he was staying away for a reason. He walked into the water and pushed out towards the raft.

There were no questions. Ritch dived and swam around

and went back on the raft to take the sun. The boy had expected him to pull a few practical jokes the way bigger fellows always did, and he was glad he didn't; it made it a quiet swim and time passed easily.

"Good diving form," said Ritch. "Do you use the board in the pools?"

"The first one. I tried the middle one once. I flopped. That can really hurt." Ritch laughed. "I can go off your shoulders. Wanna try?"

"Alright."

Ritch crouched and held one arm up to support the boy. When he was on, Ritch said, "Go," and they sprang together, the boy landing far ahead. They came up laughing.

"I thought you were gonna stand up straight," the boy shouted in gasps. "But that's a good way too."

"Race you."

They swam to shallow water with a lot of splash and stumbled to the beach.

"Had enough?" said Ritch.

"Yeah."

"Like it here?"

"Sure. It's great."

"I don't know about you, but I'm famished. It must be well past six."

"Yeah, me too. Guess we better go back and find something to eat."

"Do you have to go back there? Did you plan on it or something?"

"Oh, no. Just to get supper. Why?"

"Well, I don't like eating alone, and I usually eat out

here when I've got the company. We'll eat outside, alright? My treat."

"OK, sure. Doesn't matter when I go back."

"Great, there's no rush then. Let's change and get the stuff ready."

They went in. Ritch showered and came out again while the boy was still dressing. When they were finished, he went to one of the rooms and dragged out a broiler on wheels.

"Hardly ever use these rooms," he said. "Got them packed up with all kinds of junk. There's a tent and camping equipment in that one. Some day I'll have to build a storage room." He was on the veranda pulling the broiler along as the boy held open the doors. "Either that or get rid of a lot of this stuff."

"A tent?"

"Yes."

"Like to use outside, for camping?"

"That's what they're for."

"Do you go camping often?"

"I used to. It wears off."

They had the broiler in position on the grass bordering the sand. The sky had lost its harshness and the water was beginning to shine; on the far side, the small hills were greener and would soon blacken into a silhouette. They could hear their noises clearly in the new quiet.

"Quite a dining room, eh?" said Ritch laughing.

The boy nodded. They went back to the cottage.

"In the same room, there's a bag of charcoal. I'll dig up the food."

The boy looked at the folded tent and touched it before

picking up the charcoal bag. The tent was big, too big to carry on a bike. There was a sleeping bag rolled up next to it, but he couldn't envision his using it; Ritch's place had begun to feature in his thinking. He brought the charcoal out.

"Steaks. But I noticed that's what you had last night. Does it matter?"

"Naw."

"You like this instant stuff?" He held up a package of potato.

"Sure."

Ritch worked deftly. He fired the charcoal and brought the supplies out to the broiler, cutlery, round planks to eat from; when the potatoes were ready he put them on a shelf under the heat, and the steaks were the last to be prepared.

"You mentioned a brother a while back. Is he going to join you and your uncle?"

Through all the reminders had come the question: he was tired of lying.

"No."

"Is he younger than you?"

"No, he's bigger'n me. He's on his own, been on his own for a long time."

"What does he do?"

"Navy. He's a cook."

"Betcha he can teach me a few things, eh?"

"No."

"I guess you're pretty well alone."

"When I'm bigger I'll be on my own."

Ritch took the meat off and they started to eat.

"Who would you have if you didn't have your uncle?"

"Nobody."

"Not your brother?"

"No. From where he is, he can't be of much help."

He chewed tastelessly, he had to keep it up not to betray himself: he was peering into a new blackness, the right one this time, and he heaved dizzily from a long denied fact to the untested warmth of the man who was questioning him. But the span was too wide yet; he couldn't go from one to the other, Ritch couldn't take care of things, not everything, not if he knew it all, not then, and he'd have to be told everything to be of any use. He felt the pull of the man's humanity like resisted sleep, but his fear kept him alert: there was time yet.

"I'm gonna get me a tent some day," he said tonelessly.

"They're fun at your age."

Ritch chatted about tents, answering the boy's questions, and it was late when they finished eating; they cleaned up in the gathering darkness.

"Leave the stuff there, it won't rain tonight."

"Yeah, it's gonna be nice."

They walked towards the cottage, and the boy stood on the walk as though waiting to go to the car.

"I guess you want to go back," said Ritch.

"Guess so."

"What are you going to do in a hotel room?"

"Nothing," he said, but he knew he'd be troubled.

"You can watch TV inside if you want."

"It'll get late, I might fall asleep." He couldn't bring himself to ask or decide to stay.

"No harm done. You can even bunk here. Unless you think your uncle's going to turn up."

"No, he won't turn up."

"It's settled then."

He followed Ritch inside, staring at his back without lying and fighting the words that twitched in his mind: nobody, Ritch, there's nobody.

24.

Simon put his used dishes over on the table in the other booth, sat down again and stirred his coffee tenderly as he looked at the papers he had made room for. Prince was still eating. The waitress came over quickly, as though she had made a mistake in not seeing him finish, and stacked the dishes on a tray. Prince nodded at her and put a tip on the tray as she left.

"You eat too fast, you'll wear the help down. You could've tipped her."

"Gotta keep expenses down," Simon grunted. "You eat like three guys."

"At this hour," it was past eight-thirty, "I could eat the three guys."

Simon drank some of his coffee.

"This bank did a lot of business this morning," he said, looking at the sheets in front of him.

"It's a dead end. It always is, unless they're looking for phony stuff and they're given a list beforehand."

"Yeah. Fitzjames had them check out all the places on

the list that close before six. Zero. It's a long shot, if our man's the one who passed that bill."

"That 'if' is doing too much work. He'd be getting here, after leaving Vince, some time around midnight at the earliest. Now what's open at that time? Bars, hotels, motels, restaurants, bowling alleys, garages, dance-halls, clubs, places that are used to looking the customers over. Nobody remembers anyone that looks like our man."

"We haven't covered them all yet." Simon looked at the names.

"Sure, but put it at 2 A.M., and the list's even smaller, especially if narrowed down to one bank's deposits. It's not gonna take us long to finish checking that one out."

"This list's not exclusive. He could've stopped at a motel, and the motel could've bought something."

"Not at that hour."

"Yeah. Anyway they're checking every place on the highway coming in. You finished?" He indicated Prince's empty plate.

"For now."

Simon got the check, left half a dollar behind, and paid the cashier.

The street was lit up and glaring with the evening's activities, and the night above it looked darker than it really was. Traffic was steady but not as frantic as when they had arrived.

Prince said, "Where to?" and stopped near the car.

"A hotel, Les Manoirs. We can walk it, that's their sign over there."

A person, here and there, gave them a thoughtful look as they strolled, without speaking, through the idling vaca-

tioners and the holiday sounds. A local constable, in a grey short-sleeved shirt, was standing outside a tavern talking to a short man in a white apron. His eyes travelled over Simon and Prince and said nothing; when they had passed him, Prince noticed that the constable had shifted his position to watch them better.

When they saw the hotel's side street entrance and the small red neon "Bar" further down, Prince said, "I'll take the bar, see you inside."

Simon went in the side entrance. Three men, in dark summer suits, standing near the front, were engaged in lively conversation, hands going, and laughter bursting out quietly. A young couple came out of the dining room. From the bar, the sound of a lone piano player and the murmur of quiet talk, it was too early to have to shout over the noise. Prince came through the entrance and joined Simon. The clerk watched them.

"Nothing. Just some after dinner drinking."

They went to the desk.

"Good evening," said the clerk.

"Evening," said Simon and opened his identification on the desk. "Maybe you can help us."

"Oh. Yes, of course. You men are from out of town?"

"Montreal."

"I sec. What brings you up here? This is out of your—huh—region, isn't it?"

"It sure is," said Prince innocently. "You never can tell where this business'll take us."

"Sounds interesting. Huh—have you seen the local police?"

"Yeah," said Simon, "and Sergeant Fitzjames of the Provincial police, so you don't have to worry about pacifying the local cops."

"Well, I wasn't—"

"That's OK, we know how it is."

"Yes, well, what can I do for you?"

Simon described the man they were looking for.

"Did you have anyone register who answers that description, say yesterday or late last night?"

The clerk took out the card file and hunted through it.

"No."

"Could I see the cards?"

"Why, yes."

Simon went through them, starting with the latest arrivals, and asking the clerk to describe each person.

"Who is this T. Brenton from Montreal?"

"Let me see. Oh, yes. A student, I believe he's checked out. Working for a lumber company."

Simon passed the file back.

"Do you remember making change for a 20-dollar bill, or having to make change for one of your waiters?"

"I see a lot of twenties. And the waiters have their own cash registers in the bar and the dining room. Why do you ask?"

"Just part of the wider picture," said Prince.

"Thanks a lot," said Simon, and added to Prince when they moved away: "I'll take the dining room."

He went to the far end, as close to the cash register as possible. When the waiter came with a glass of water, he took it and said, "Were you on duty here yesterday?"

"Yes, I was."

Simon told him who he was and the man sat down. When he was briefed and questioned, the man said, "Most everybody, parties of two, three, especially if they've had drinks, pay me with a twenty. But I don't remember anybody like you describe."

"How late do you stay open?"

"Oh, it varies. When things slow down, we call it a day."

"Last night?"

"Oh, maybe nine-thirty."

"You don't remember anyone unusual?"

"No, no tough characters" He laughed, suddenly amused, and said, "Just a scared greenhorn kid who didn't leave a tip. And the guy with him was a regular who is a good tipper."

"How old was this kid?"

"Oh, about thirteen. Looked older than my boy, he's eleven."

"What did he look like?"

"Just a kid, crew cut growing back in, thin face, a kid like any other kid."

"Do you know where he's staying?"

"No idea. You're not looking for a kid, are you?"

"I don't know for sure. Did he pay you with a twenty?"

"Yeah, that's the joke, from a twenty I usually get a good tip."

"You said the man with him was a regular. Who is he?"

"Man called Mayser, I think. He's got money, hangs around. He wasn't exactly with the kid, he came over and ate with him and left before the kid was finished."

Prince came in and waved Simon to him. Simon left the waiter.

"Fitzjames called," said Prince. "He's got something."

"Just got a line on a boy that sounds like the Landers kid. He paid for supper with a twenty. Now how do you figure that? What's Fitzjames got?"

They were walking down the stairs from the front entrance. When they turned on the sidewalk to get to the car, someone spoke behind them:

"Hold it a minute."

The constable in the grey shirt came over with authority on his face.

"You guys new in town?"

He looked at their jackets.

Simon's hand went to his hip pocket to produce his identification.

"We're officers, Montreal."

"Go slow, I've had that gag pulled on me just once."

He took Simon's wallet, and handed it back.

"Sorry," said the constable. "But you know we're combing the place."

"Yeah. See you around."

They hurried to the car, and Prince got it moving.

"Fitzjames says there's new talent in town. One of his grapevine boys matched up our description, but none of the mug shots. Seems a local hood called Brodson is in on a hot money deal with this guy."

"Guess he made it, if the money's circulating."

"Didn't sound that way."

"I hope he remembered to bring his Browning. The captain'd like that."

25.

He wasn't sleeping well. The television show kept running through his head, and he imagined he wasn't asleep at times; the screen took up all the space and the guns were too big. He was puzzled by this, they weren't that big when he watched the shows on the poolroom set; but the guns scared him now. They didn't seem to bother Ritch, he kept reading—how could he read with the set squeezing him out?—in the corner with all the books. He strained to see Ritch and to get things back into proportion. But he can't be there, the show's over and I'm lying down. What show? There's no show, that guy with the gun's real, I'm only gonna tell you once and then this here's gonna talk for me— The fantasy pulled away and blurred like an after-image. It was dark again and full of alertness Ritch, listen, my brother said never to trust anybody, but you're like him a lot, and maybe if you— It's just the two of us, kid, me and you, that's all, nobody's gonna take to us, not when they get to know things; you're a nice little boy, until they get told, and then you're not a nice little boy, you're not even a boy, just a problem, nobody's big enough to take it, we're through with them official bastards— Ritch, do you have to know? Can't it be just me, without all the rest of it? Ritch looking pleasantly at ease flipped the blankets over the couch, you can sleep here, Tom, I always use the living room. Light bother you? I'm going to read for a while. What if it's all lies, Ritch, what I told you? Wouldya still do it? The question pressed itself into the dark and travelled forever. Suddenly he was seeing the

room, clear but distorted, so clear that he really thought he was awake in the dark, he could even see the water outside. He tried to sit up. Nothing moved. He thought he had completed the action, but the clarity returned and he was still on his back. Try getting your arm up. He tried. Nothing. Try again, again. In what seemed like full consciousness, he realized he couldn't move. Get your arm up! Up! His voice was panic that bounced all over the room, why doesn't Ritch hear? Your arm, your arm, move it. He strained with a force that would have torn his muscles, but nothing happened. Alright, rest a bit, wait. The water outside glistened like broken glass and came right to the doors. Wait a minute. That's not the water that's outside Ritch's place, it's not broken glass and it doesn't come this far, and if I was lying flat I wouldn't be able to see it anyway: I'm dreaming. Move your arms, up, push, come on, hard, push, wake up, you're asleep and dreaming, push hard, come on, wake up, wake— His trouble passed as quickly as it came, and in an instant he was awake.

He lay there, glad for his return to the real world, and he held on to his joy until his full memory set in. Just a dream, it wasn't real trouble, but he was still eager to orient himself in the room. No lights were on. From the couch he could see a faint strip of water through the double doors, and the screens let through the sharp-tongued night noises. He didn't sit up or look for Ritch who'd be on the other couch behind him; without adverting to it, he took it for granted that he was awake as well. The slight knowledge passed as he forgot the dream and stared at his clothes which he had draped near him over the back of the couch. They were his good pants, and it felt as if he'd be going to

church in the morning; he shunted the image of going with Milt to his opening the door of the church on the highway. The idea remained until he was passing the building in a car and wondering why they weren't going by boat, the road's no problem to a good boat, I swam twelve lengths, I'm glad you didn't ask me how come I had no parents, you can cook pretty good too, why do you live alone? The words unrolled into sleep and reality went elsewhere. But it returned. After a while he was actually waking up because someone was touching him, stroking him.

There was no mistake this time, no distortion, no broken glass: he knew time had passed and he was coming awake, drowsily, and it was real. Someone was saying something, Ritch's voice, close, not loud

"You were lying," said Ritch.

"Yes."

"About the uncle."

"Yeah, I was lying." He had wanted so badly to tell Ritch, and now the words came out before he could think.

"And the brother?"

"Milt—" He was fully awake now.

"You're safe with me."

"Was I dreaming?"

"Yes." The stroking continued.

"Out loud?"

"Just noises. I came over."

"Oh."

"You're safe here. I won't ask things."

"You just did."

"You can stay."

"I can?"

He understood that things were strange, muffled in a curious urgency, but he couldn't make sense of them: some of the truth was out, it seemed unimportant compared to something else. He decided not to say any more; and when that freed part of his attention, he noticed that he was being embraced gently by the shoulder and the thigh. He moved to sit up, but the positions didn't change. He felt an arm come further around just below his shoulders. The man's head was a warm darkness; as he whispered, his lips moved on the boy's cheek.

"I don't care about the lies," the darkness said.

"No?"

"I can help."

"Lemme go." He could only gasp the words, and he felt his arm shake on the back of the couch

"It's not so bad, you'll see."

The man's hands indicated what wasn't going to be so bad, a firmer embrace, a movement along the thigh. The boy tried to squirm loose.

"Tom."

The boy was voiceless now, and it was taken to mean assent. A long-expected enemy was defined by the pressing darkness, by someone he had needed so deeply he had begun to love him as he had loved Milt, someone who could have held him while he looked at Milt's death: it was worse than Milt's dying, it was as if he had been knowingly abandoned. He looked at his facts anyway now, he had moved past his old pain. Milt's dead, you know, the fact choked its way to his eyes, yeah, I know, and he felt the man's lips pressuring to remove his last strand of self-

possession. His right hand groped for the knife in his clothes and he took it out and snapped it open. The darkness didn't seem to hear it.

He had an awkward grip, like holding a pointer, and he couldn't use it from the side, the back of the couch was in the way. He brought it up close to his own face with the back of his hand on his wet cheekbone. The blade pointed to the man's neck. "Tom." The words the boy had meant as warning came out as a sob and he whimpered as he plunged the knife down. The man twitched back, tearing against the blade, and collapsed almost immediately with a long sigh.

The boy had come to his feet as it was happening, and he stood there for a long time feeling the trembling grow upwards from the floor. He knew he was standing in blood, and he could see the blackness on his arm, his chest, the shorts he had been sleeping in, the sheet and covers on the couch. He was very quiet inside, like the calm of high speeds; no words took voice, no images arose, and yet all was clearly known: he wasn't going to turn on the light, and he was going to have to wash. It all seemed so simple, except for the trembling.

When his decision finally reached him, he stepped backwards and very slowly wiped his feet on one of the scatter rugs. He stayed in motion and walked to the double doors, opened them, and went outside onto the veranda, down the steps, the cool night air increasing his trembling, along the gravel to the sand, still holding the knife, and finally into the water where he dropped the knife to soak and continued to knee-height where he sat down and removed his shorts. He washed by submerging and rising again like

a man doing push-ups; he did it until his feet were cramping and he was sure he was clean. With the same elaboration he washed the knife, and when he stood up, naked, to walk back to the cottage, he began to feel the night and the things it held: he was open to defeat, exposed for a blow at the pit of his stomach, and he walked with the knife held low in front of him.

Inside the doors he waited until he was certain he couldn't see any better; he circled the whole room, not looking at the man, and made his way to the couch from behind. He wondered if his clothes had been splattered. His eyes moved along the back of the couch and he closed them as he felt a motion towards the man on the floor. The clothes weren't there, they had fallen behind where he stood; he sprang downwards, grabbed them, and scurried, still in a crouch, to the far end of the room near the door, the door they had first entered. He was still wet, loath to use a towel, it belonged to the place, and his pants stuck as he tugged them on; he tried not to hurry: he strapped on his watch, checked his possessions, put the knife in his right hand pocket, decided not to take his bathing suit which was in the kitchen section, and as he stepped back towards the door he felt his feet still bare, he knew he'd have to go near the man to get his shoes.

He went quickly; the trembling had come back and he was afraid he'd panic. He simply walked over, took the shoes and socks, and without thinking about it, took them over to the kitchen and pulled open the small refrigerator to get light that wouldn't be blinding: the tops of the shoes were clean. He closed the refrigerator, crossed the room,

and went out the door that led to the road. Once outside, he sat on the grass to put on his shoes and socks.

The car gleamed quietly in the driveway. It was pointed to complete the semi-circle to the gravel road which looked now like a solid corridor of blackness. He went to it and pulled open the door. The interior light startled him as though someone else had turned it on, and when he banged the door shut, he realized that he had caused it. He got behind the wheel and left the door open to get the light. The keys were in the ignition where the man had left them, and he tried to remember the sequence of actions that got the car started. The key and the lever on the wheel, but the key first, and maybe one of the pedals, the far one he used when we were moving, so that's the gas, and the other one must be a brake. He turned the key a little and nothing happened. He noticed that a marking indicated that the key could be turned further. He did that and the engine grumbled and caught; cautiously he touched the gas pedal and the engine's action increased. He fumbled with the knobs in front of him, he pulled, and pushed, and finally twisted. The wipers jumped up and something hummed, and at last the driveway was floodlit. In a hurry now, and thinking he had done all that was necessary, he pressed the gas pedal and pulled the lever on the wheel. The car squealed and lurched ahead and he turned the wheel enough to miss the trees but not enough to complete a turn onto the road; the car, still turning, crossed the road, rushed off the shoulder and thudded along tilted into the ditch until it hit a small boulder.

He was behind the wheel still holding on. He hadn't closed the driver's door and had held on in fright not to be

thrown out of the car. The lights glared up at the trees and along the road; bugs were coming to investigate. He didn't even think of trying to move the car or doing anything to it. He hoisted himself across the seat and crawled out. He let the door swing shut as he was feeling his pockets and starting to run, faster and faster as he grew certain that he had all his things and wouldn't have to return.

The light lasted for a long while. The road turned but the glow and the spill of the lights kept it vaguely discernible ahead of him. All he could hear was his own breathing and the rustle and clinkle of his clothes as he ran. The noise made it impossible for him to hear anything else, and a new panic grew as he imagined that he could be heard for miles. He stopped running and tried to walk, but his heavy breathing continued and he decided to stand still. He was far from the car now and the road was still dimly visible where he was but black where the trees overhung it: the sky was bright enough to make the road stand out a little, but he couldn't make out anything clearly. Sudden darknesses took shape as if they had just moved towards him, and seeing nothing he felt himself forced to see something to account for it; the towering blackness came down closer to take a look at him, and the night noises pressed in as though he were the center of their focus, the high-toned pulsing of what he thought was crickets, but it was too loud, something pushing its way through cracking twigs, the sharp sarcastic yiping of some bird that seemed to be enjoying his panic, a quick unwarning flutter, a splash that sounded close and made him think he was on the wrong road. When he started walking again, he couldn't stop the gravel from rolling and filling the night

with his echoes. He held the knife ready and let himself move ahead. .

The trees closed in and formed a long tunnel that was almost completely dark, he could hardly see the glow of his arm as he moved it, he saw it only because it was his; and since he felt the road under his feet, he imagined he could see the gravel, a solid blur that seemed to reach his knees. When he blinked, the dark moved like black paint, and the noise increased in his head where he felt his feet thudding and cracking through the stones as he lurched with each step on the uneven surface. It could come now without his seeing it, something swift and hostile in the dark: it could be an inch from his face and he would never know it had been there. He brought his hand up in front of him and walked even more awkwardly.

Slowly, he grew tired and more used to the continuing turbulence; he tried pressing on faster, new sounds arose and followed him and he listened carefully until he had placed them all and located the rasping his pants were making. It was all accounted for and it was time to go faster: but as he tensed to do this, a visible blur appeared on the road ahead as if someone had snapped on a light.

He stopped, prickling with fright, and looked at the new trouble. It didn't move; at least he was sure it didn't move from side to side, it could have been moving towards him, and it must have been moving before because it had appeared so suddenly. The droning in his head prevented him from hearing anything. He inched forward crunching the gravel as softly as he could, and in a while the blur grew wider, tending to his left, too wide for an animal, a human, and he realized that the blur moved because he

was in motion: he was approaching a clearing. He stopped again, this time to let his excitement pass. He wondered what could be done about the droning in his head; he didn't dwell on it. He was so eager to get out of the tunnel that he started running to the blur. The noise burst like a landslide and he had no way to keep his footing: he lurched into what felt like a manhole and knew before he hit that he was falling and rolled in time to break his fall.

He stayed down, not moving, listening hard into the quiet darkness. The rough ground was reassuring and the stillness was welcome: the noise of the fall had been deafening, and it hadn't drawn an attack; he was cautious with the idea, the attack hadn't come here, it could come in another place. Nothing had changed, the night resumed its activity, the pulsing in his head returned, the road waited stolidly. He saw his knife a few feet away, a slight glint around which he built its image, and got up to retrieve it, less disturbed now by his own sounds and anxious to get to the clearing. He walked rapidly away from the overhanging trees, with the impression of leaving a lot of danger behind him, and watched the blurred road widen like the sensation of being freed. He was well into it before he noticed that a blackness stood in the middle of it. He wanted to stop, and almost did, but he knew from the last time that he'd have to get closer to find out what it was; there was less fear in moving than in being frozen to one spot. He edged to the left and approached in despair, surrendering to the danger until he was sure it was an immobile object, more than that, it was big like a stretch of bush, and then he knew: the road forked there and

formed a peak, he was getting closer to the highway. It would be easier if he could hear better; he shook his head to quiet the pressure on his ears, it did no good. He kept walking.

He knew the hearing could clear, he remembered how still things had been when he had fallen. Noise, real noise makes the inside one less, he tried kicking, but his footing was too precarious and the sound wasn't loud enough. Make a noise, a real noise, he thought of speaking out loud. He looked at the idea for a long time and the road passed under him full of warning, speaking would give away his position, and he became aware that his jaw was as tight as a cramp and his lips were stiff with grimness. Make a noise, an inside noise that you can hear from the outside, like a shout, a small one. He couldn't think of anything to make a word with, but the decision was already in motion:

"He's dead!"

The words swept the darkness clean for a moment. It was as if someone else had spoken. The voice wasn't his, it was deeper and bitter, and its edge stung through the night with its bleeding news, and no answer came, no response, and the buzzing returned as though all were known already and the night waited for him to catch up. He had gained nothing and his walking got faster and more stumbling as his brain filled with the jumble of words and knowledges and fantasies that he couldn't hold back as his fears unstrung themselves and had their way, he's dead, and he made me sticky, and he was gonna know about us, he didn't believe about the uncle, I got him in the neck and all his blood came out at once, all over, it's easy to go, just go, like nothing, I said your name to him, I said your name

to him—and he had to address the night again to stop his helplessness: “I didn’t spot the play, Milt, like you would’ve, I didn’t spot it.”

The words did no good, they called on someone who didn’t exist and filled the unheeding dark with images. They’ll find him some time, and see things that’ll lead them to me, I left the headlights on, and my trunks are there. He felt his legs trembling as he saw the black spreading on the floor near the huge form of the man, I didn’t spot the play, he was a friend, and he didn’t ask— We’ve got no friends, kid, remember that, you gotta stay on your own. —I’ve got no own. Milt, why do you have to keep coming back? Can’t you go and stay gone?— Hey, kid, what’re you doing on this road anyway?— I’m waiting for my uncle. —Your uncle? Come off it, that’s me. —I’m waiting for my uncle. He didn’t believe about the uncle, but that was alright, he was like a friend, he was gonna listen and maybe help and say he’d fix things, he was alone too and I wanted to stay. A new voice intruded speaking softly, you can talk to me, I’m your friend and all these people are going to take care of you, this is like a new home. —You’re not my brother, get me my brother. —I can’t now, we’ll take care of you and you can see him when he comes out. —You’re not taking care of me, you’re doing this because you have to. —Because I like you. —You don’t even know me. —I’d like to. —You wouldn’t do it if you didn’t have to, you wouldn’t do it, I don’t want you, I want my brother.

He was twitching with effort and half running; when he realized it, he kept trotting so that he’d have to concentrate on keeping his balance, but the images and pressures followed close behind reaching out to define him in the dark:

the huge strain became successful, he had done something impossible, they were letting Milt out of prison. He saw the paved highway less blurred than the gravel up ahead and the elation of his success made him run to it. I got him out! I got him out! And he was with him then, crying on an unmoving chest, held, home, the real person who made real things. A dog barked in the distance and he was cut off suddenly, looking at the sparkling sky, and he cursed back at the dog, swinging his knife in his direction and ending up on his knees in the gravel, stabbing through the stones: "I want my brother back! I want him back!" He was on his feet as he was saying it, the noise and the barking reaching him now and putting him to flight; he was able to run more quietly on the pavement with better vision and with the ditches for protection.

The road kept urging him on, as long as it was there he couldn't stop; it wouldn't even let him walk. When he did slow down, he found himself trying to keep up the same speed by walking, and like a reflex the running would start again. His legs were too heavy, and his chest hurt, he felt as if he were breathing in smoke past his burning face. He didn't know how much time or distance was passing, and he couldn't bring himself to rest until finally it was impossible to run any more and he had to walk in stumbles while he hissed and gasped his breathing back to normal. He finished mounting the rise he was on and gratefully let himself drift down the opposite slope, his legs jabbing the pavement and wanting to buckle with each step. He's dead. The words blended with his chaotic rhythm and he was glad he couldn't speak them out loud. He's dead. It was

clear knowledge now, he knew the words were about Milt, and he jolted downhill helplessly.

A moving light from far behind him swept the top of the other rise, a car was coming. He thought of a lift, and dismissed it, he didn't want to be found on the highway leading from the man's place. The light flapped on the road again, disappeared, the motor became audible, coming fast, a beam cresting the hill. He ducked and leaped into the ditch, straddling the middle instinctively, and hugged the far side face down; his hand felt for the wet bottom so that he wouldn't roll into it, but it was dry, he was still on high ground. The car threw light in all directions and gushed past him overhead, making the grass creep with shadows and leaving a vacuum of silence and darkness behind. He crawled to the roadside and watched until the tail-lights were gone; he wondered if it had gone by the man's place. The thought put him back on the road.

He couldn't run any more, he still wanted to rest and the slow walk was all he could allow; he folded the knife and put it in his pocket as he wondered what he'd do if the car came back with other cars, police cars, looking and searching along the road. A dog barked tentatively far to his left; a lone light framed a small square in what must have been a farmhouse, and by shielding the light he could make out a dull gleam from a metal roof. A barn's no good, not with those dogs around, and the farmers'd ask questions and call the cops—he was up here stealing things, it's been goin' on for weeks—and they'd find the knife, and if they'd just seen him out at his place, they'd know — He thought of throwing the knife away, but the dogs made him keep it, he'd throw it away if the cops were close. It'd be better in town, there

are lots of places to hide. He tried to figure out the distance he'd covered and how far he'd have to go, and all that came to him when he thought back was the image of sustained terror punctuated with the joy he had felt when he rode this road in the man's car. He was flexed to run again, he strained to keep himself down to a walk and look at the black landmarks trying to imagine what they would be like in daylight. After a while, he noticed that the road had a gravel shoulder, no ditch, that went right up to the fence on the side; he crossed, in a position to face the oncoming traffic, and found the same thing: no ditch, he'd have no place to hide here, and he might be seen trying to get over the fence, especially if he got caught in the wire and if a car came from around a curve he couldn't see. He began to run, trying to see ahead for any light or for the beginning of another ditch; pain rose in his chest and stomach causing him to limp in mid-air, and he knew that if they saw him now, he couldn't count on running away.

A high fence appeared to his left a little way from the road, whitish criss-crossed wire, the kind around factories, a building next to it, too big for a house, no lights on. Across the road was a cluster of store fronts and low porches, a dim light in the back of one of them. Approaching from this side, it took him some time to realize where he was; he was passing the church when it occurred to him, and he turned to look at the dim school and stores to make sure they were the ones he knew.

The power pole caught the light first. He stared at the transformer that had been made visible, and as he turned to see the approaching headlights, from town, his panic was already pushing him past the church and onto the lawn

of the darkened house next to it. He changed direction as he decided not to risk going behind it, and bounded towards the shingled veranda, taking the stairs in two strides, on the side edges to avoid squeaking them, and scurried into a crouch behind the railing. The wall of the house was lit up in the spill of the headlights, and the noise told him it was a truck. A truck was alright. But even as he sensed this, another set of headlights roared by and honked, a car passing the truck. Its hurry and powerful purpose made him think of an emergency, but there was no siren. They wouldn't need one. He was sorry he hadn't looked to see if the car had a red blinker.

The pain forced him to sit down. He moved his back to the railing and tried to relax against it. His legs still felt as if they were running and his face was too hot. The pain got worse when he slumped, he pushed himself upright and inched back in slow stages until finally he could sit still and didn't have to make noises as he breathed. You'll have to keep moving, he warned himself. Yeah, when I can move. I'll get nailed if I start now, guys'd stop just to see what the hell I was doin' on the road. One guy, that's all it would take. He could see the amused face, the open car door, the tormenting questions, where are you coming from this late?—he wondered what time it was—did you hear about the guy they found Lack there? Kinda dangerous to be out with that going on, say, were you in a fight or something, you look sorta— More light appeared on the wall of the house, and he was glad he hadn't started out.

He watched the dark on the left of the window frame get smaller and the shadow of the veranda post moving to the door; he waited to see it whip past and disappear, but the

car was coming slowly. He could hardly hear the motor. The light grew brighter and slower, he stiffened as he watched, and finally it stopped, in line with the house he guessed, the motor idling. He pulled his head down in case it was that they had seen, but he was sure he was in shadow. A door opened, two male voices rumbled something for a while, the door closed. The footsteps that he heard were drowned out by the car turning and going back the way it came. By the time he could hear them again, they were mounting the stairs heavily. The man was a deep black movement going to the door, coins jingling as he searched for keys. He stooped to put down a small black case and fumbled through his clothes with both hands. His face was a glow compared to his clothes, and it stopped and peered in the boy's direction as he said, "Ah," partly in surprise and partly in conversation.

"Were you waiting for me?"

The boy pulled his feet back, ready to spring up. He didn't answer.

"Can't seem to find my keys," the priest said musingly. He could sense the boy's stiff panic, as if someone were trying to keep a shattered glass from crumbling, and he wanted to act normally, slowly, to offer himself as a needed welcome. He pulled open the screen door and tried the inner door, it wasn't locked. He picked up the black case.

"Will you come inside?"

No answer. The boy was waiting for a chance to run. But he knew that if he did, he'd be sure to arouse suspicion or concern, either way the hunt would be on. He'd have to stall. If they were seen here, nobody would think anything

about it. But he'd have to have a good story, and all he had now was the truth.

The priest had put on a light inside the house and left the inner door open; the light caught part of the veranda and the stairs. He looked through the screen door and came out again. The boy noticed the cassock.

"Is somebody sick, or something, is that what brought you here?" The priest knew it was a useless question, but he wanted to preserve the boy's privacy. He didn't look at the boy as he asked it.

"No "

The priest sat down on the top step and faced the highway. His hair was almost all gone, brushed back in thin wisps, and his neck was red, like a farmer's. When he turned, he showed a round face, also red, a nose that seemed to have been punched soft, and eyebrows that gave him an air of inquiry that wasn't shared by his friendly and unsurprised eyes.

"What's your name?" he said gently.

"Everybody calls me kid." Traces of his earlier gasping remained.

"I'd like very much to call you by a name, your first name." Bugs were collecting on the screen door. "But if you can't tell me, that's alright."

"Tom." He had to tally with the hotel register.

"Do you live around here?"

"At the hotel. I'm—"

"In town?" the priest asked just to keep the slim contact from breaking.

"Yeah, I'm waiting for my uncle. We're—" But he couldn't continue.

"Yes?"

"Nothing."

"What are you doing way out here?"

"I went swimming. Had to come back alone." He could feel his legs shaking again, and he couldn't keep the trembling out of his voice. "I better get going." He got up, still shaking, and walked down the stairs slowly. He knew he was leaving an open trail, but he didn't know how to close it.

"It's pretty late. Did you meet with some kind of trouble?"

It was an opening, a small one, only a thread across the chasm, and threads always break. He took a step sideways and leaned between the stairs and the veranda.

"Yeah, there was trouble."

They didn't speak for a while. A car passed without a flasher. Several times he almost broke away and ran, and the chaos of images was ready to go with him.

"He's dead." He calmed the turbulence.

When he didn't speak any more, the priest said, "Did you see an accident?"

"No."

The boy waited again, and spoke as though he expected to be defeated by lies.

"Is it true what they said in school—that you don't tell what people tell you?"

"Yes, if they tell it in confession. Is that what you want?"

"Yeah. No matter what people tell you?"

"Yes."

"No matter who asks you?"

"Yes."

"Even the c— police?"

"Yes, even them."

"—even the bishop—?" It was the first time he'd ever used the word.

"Even the bishop can't make me say anything."

"You'd die first?"

"I guess I would have to." His voice smiled a little. "But I hope I never have to."

The dark was less hostile. The night played with its noises and more bugs had collected on the screen.

"I killed him. The man, Ritch. He took me swimming, over there." His breath hissed with his shaking.

"Sit down, Tom. It's over now, there's nothing more to happen."

"No."

"Did you have to kill him?"

"Yes— No. He was holding me, and he knew things, and I hit him with my knife, he was my friend, for a long while."

"Holding. Were you fighting when it happened?"

"No. No."

"What was—?"

"There was nobody, and he was gonna be like somebody, I was counting on—then all he wanted to do was screw me. If M—"

"Dying is pretty serious, did you want to kill him?"

"I dunno. I guess I did, then."

The priest sat with his hands together and his arms resting on his knees; he couldn't act on this knowledge, he could only persuade.

"I could have someone take you to the hotel. I don't have a car, and in the morning you—"

"No." He moved away from the stairs.

"I'm not telling you to go to the police. You could let your uncle handle things when he gets here, or if you let me, maybe I could—"

"No."

"You can stay here, if you want, or with the sisters, just—"

"No, no."

"They'll find it out soon enough. Your uncle's the best—"

"He's not coming." He was backing away now, close to his real pain. "He's not my uncle, he's my brother, and he's dead, he's on the street—"

"Tom, we can still do—"

"—leaning over like when he was in bed and he's dying and nobody can do anything about that any more."

He was running as he said the last words, full of panic now, and the dark road absorbed him: his real trouble was too much to share.

The priest watched him go. The shattered glass had begun to crumble; the boy's distrust had tied his hands with the seal of confession, and he couldn't follow him into town.

26.

The window in the storeroom of the hotel was jammed. The clerk pulled and rattled it and felt himself grow wet

with panic; Brodson wouldn't wait if he saw the window closed, and he was due to arrive. After phoning him, the clerk had waited till the last minute to go to the storeroom. He tried the window again, it held. He felt for nails at the side, on the top, and angrily remembered that he had overlooked the catch: he flicked it and eased the window open.

Noise from the main street tunneled into the lane, loud at first, and he waited for familiar sounds to establish that he was far enough away. He didn't risk putting his head out. His success with the window restored his shrewdness, he planned to get a good look at the man Brodson was bringing; once the transaction was over he would be in the clear and free to point them out, and he might have to later, the police were getting too close. He could claim he never saw the boy, that the room was paid for by somebody else and that he was in there without his knowledge, but the boy would deny it, it didn't matter, he could be proved a liar very easily. If things went according to plan, the matter would never come up; it was a perfect move.

He fussed with his watch trying to catch some of the dim light. He gave up. It would be close to eleven-fifteen, and the waiting would seem longer than it really was. He heard a motorcycle roar to a stop on the street; the waves of talk and shuffling continued under the sound of the restaurant's exhaust. He wondered if he should take a look. He decided against it, maybe a loiterer had entered the lane to delay Brodson. Maybe not. He knew he'd be relatively safe, he had made sure that the hotel workers brought cartons of waste and garbage to the front of the lane; it made a good barrier to keep cars out and to prevent people from look-

ing past it. Perfect. He peered along the inside edge of the window and saw only the wall of the restaurant. Someone, close by, whistled between his teeth. He looked out and saw two men.

He was higher than they were, their heads came to the sill, Brodson on the left and a tall man on the right. The tall man had shiny hair combed carefully in wavy layers that caught the light from the street. He had a package under his arm.

"You got it?" asked the clerk.

"Yeah," said the tall man with the hair. "Will five grand do it?"

"Five—? Yes!"

"Here."

The money was held out a little too far. The clerk stooped out of the window to reach it and his head met the metal that came up swiftly and struck him on the cheekbone. It seemed to wrap itself around his head, nailing the ear-piece of his glasses, and it hurt as nothing had hurt before. He tumbled out of the window, fell clumsily on his side, his whole body tensing for greater pain, and feet kicking him to a sitting position.

"Punk." The gun was pointed at his head.

"You're not gonna kill him!" It was Brodson, in panic.

Another man, massive and slow-moving, appeared behind Brodson and held him by the neck.

"You two will talk first chance," said the tall wavy one.

"Me? Not me! I'm the guy that set you up in this."

The big man dragged Brodson further back into the lane.

The clerk screamed and hurled himself at the wavy one. They stumbled. The package fell to the ground and was

kicked open, money flying all over the lane towards the street. A motorcycle started up.

"Man, look at that loot, our fr-r-riend deserves a favor."

It was a new voice, from one of the three toughs, in windbreakers, all young, who advanced from the street, crouched and jumping. One had a long-barrelled .22, the others knives.

"I told you the little clerk man was sniffin' right."

"Couldn't'a been righter if he had it up a snatch."

"Sure bought himself an assful this time."

They laughed and darted around like disturbed flies. The wavy man forgot the clerk who scrambled against the wall.

"Clear out or you'll get blasted," said the wavy man roughly.

A thud from the back of the lane, Brodson falling, and the other big man saying calmly, "OK, let's take them." The three young toughs scurried away in a flash.

Giggles arose from behind the pile of refuse. It was the only sound. It created a silence after it, and the wavy man decided to move forward to retrieve the money. Then it broke loose.

The motorcycle zoomed into the lane, its headlight blazing, the driver dropping off; a carton of garbage was thrown at the wavy hair as the .22 began firing, and the three rushed in yelling and whooping. The bigger guns roared from inside the lane, but the light had blinded both men, and the big one had been hit. The trio backed away from the tall man, he had been stabbed, and they watched him.

He put his back to the restaurant wall, firing anywhere,

his hair falling over his face. He tried to edge to the street, his gun empty now. People gathered, dartingly, and peered cautiously into the lane.

"Look at the blood squirt." More laughs.

He dropped.

The driver moved the motorcycle out through the far end of the lane as the others scooped up most of the money and ran to the street. But the crowd had thickened.

"Were you guys attacked?"

"Yeah, man, we were attacked, like violated. Let us through."

"What's that you got there?"

A siren, and another, wailed its way closer. They began pushing their way through the crowd, and a clearance was made for the .22. But they couldn't break away yet. Someone threw an ice cream cone at the man with the gun, and another scuffle started. The money scattered on the pavement, people rushed to pick up the flurry of bills, collisions exploded into fights, and the turmoil grew until even the arriving sirens couldn't control it.

They worked for twenty minutes to restore order. A fire hose was connected to a hydrant on the side street, but they didn't have to use it. Fitzjames tried to shout over the noise that the money was no good to them, but he had to wait for a patrol car to bring an amplifier before he could be heard. "The money is listed, it's stolen money, and listed, it can't be spent, give it to the nearest officer." He imposed the words on the crowd until they took effect, and beginning from the hotel the police moved the onlookers back to the other sidewalk. A spotlight was finally trained on the lane where Simon had been working.

The clerk sat on the ground under the storeroom window.

"I need a doctor," he was saying.

"Eventually," said Simon. "What happened here?"

"I don't know."

"How did you get into it?"

"I was passing the storeroom, I heard something and decided to look out here. Someone struck me, and that's all I remember."

Another detective said, "That guy over there's Brodson. He's just coming out of it, says there was a gang."

Prince was standing over the dead man by the restaurant wall. He worked the gun loose and tied a tag on it. He had a constable witness his action and his initials on the tag. He went over to Simon.

"Our two won't talk, they're both dead."

"We've found the money. It'll make good press."

"Won't get our hands on a third of it."

Official cars started to arrive, an ambulance, people ducked away as the police went around asking for names; Fitzjames assigned his investigators and joined Simon.

"We'll take these two in I still don't know what happened."

27.

The boy kept moving down the side street. Clusters of people shifted about the front of the hotel, cars moved reluctantly as if waiting for something to happen, and when it cleared, he saw the police car, parked, not blinking, on the

far side of the main street. It was just another fact, something to avoid. He walked slowly into the hotel's back lane, went in the rear entrance and up the red-lit stairs to the third floor. A lot of talk came from one room. The rest were quiet.

When he opened his door, he heard the radio. Calmly, and without feeling his surprise, he remembered he had left it on that morning. He turned it off and put on the table light. Immediately he took the suitcase out of the closet and unlocked and opened it on the floor; standing in front of it, he removed his dirt-caked clothes, tossed them on the bed, and methodically put on shorts, dungarees and a T-shirt. He filled his pockets from the other pants, knelt by the suitcase and removed everything he thought he wouldn't need, the camper's belt, the baseball glove—he could see Milt packing it, but that too was just another fact—the extra clothes; the cloth bag he didn't touch: it was still full. When he was finished strapping the bag, he put out the light, left the room without looking at the street below, and made his way to the rear exit. He didn't hurry. Everything seemed clear and easy to decide, his head whined with a buzzing detachment; he was beyond emotion: it was all so simple, he was leaving.

He walked back up the side street, two blocks, turned, circling the hotel, three blocks more, turned again and continued until he was on the main street near the point where he had seen the transport bus emerge that morning. He found the depot easily, it was a wide paved lane with a stand-up lunch counter, now closed, under an overhanging roof. He went in and put money at the wicket.

“To Montreal.”

"You're out of luck. It just left, and it was late. There was an awful jam outside. Next one's in the morning."

"Yeah."

He left and retraced his steps behind the hotel, crossed the side street, kept going until he estimated he was far enough and turned back to the main street. He liked the lights and the cars, they corresponded to his impersonal energy, he could almost hear them crackling. He looked for and found a cab stand, and got in the back of the first one. When the driver turned around, he was ready. He showed him a handful of bills.

"Missed my bus. It's not far. I want to get on it."

The driver looked at the money, at the boy.

"Is it that important?"

"Yeah. Death in the family."

"OK, which way?"

"What do you mean which way?"

"Mont Laurier or Montreal?"

"Montreal."

The cab started. They drove along the main street, reached the turn-off to the beach, turned and stopped for a traffic light. The radio came alive. The driver hesitated and responded.

"The police want our cooperation in looking for three men—" the voice droned on in French, giving descriptions and details of possible whereabouts. The driver took the light. "—also for a boy, aged 12, who may—"

Another decision came; his mind felt like laughing, and he moved fast to keep up with the speed in his head.

"I changed my mind, mister. I'll take the morning bus."

The driver stopped and shut the meter. Swiftly, the boy handed him a bill without looking at it.

"This do?"

"A twenty! No thanks, not tonight."

"Alright. Here."

"Say, where'd you get—?"

He was out of the cab and up the cross street, running clumsily with the suitcase. The cab would have to turn around to follow. By the time it did, he was crouching in a vacant lot on another street. The car circled away from the corner he had taken and disappeared in the opposite direction. He scurried out of the grass.

The street he was on ended after a while and became a dirt road leading to the lake; he followed it until he was out of breath and had to stop, still not feeling fear, ready to move, as though things were being decided automatically for someone else. The highway was useless now, and would be for some time. Headlights appeared on the street he had just left; they looked unmoving, but he knew they were going slowly and searching the darkness. To his left was the dark hollow of a path leading through a wooded area that held clear spaces like a picnic ground; he went into it at a fast pace and began to see the water shining through the trees. The path ended on a large field, near a chicken wire backstop: if they played ball here, cars must be able to make it easily by the road; it wasn't safe. He ran across the field, tripped in some high grass, and came out on the sand and mud that bordered the lake. If you could see the trees, they can see you now. The relentless clarity pushed him along the beach until he was sure he could not be seen.

He was on the shore of a bay that had lights on either point like bare bulbs strung out along the piers. Music drifted from somewhere to his right; he knew it came from the dance hall near the red bench where Ritch had found him. As he looked, he saw two lights travel one behind the other along the road to the point: cars still searching and coming closer. When he turned to move up along the beach, he noticed more lights on the other road. He wasn't surprised; it was all clear and calm and made good sense, except for the high-toned activity in his head; it was as though he had no real difficulties, only a course to follow, things to do. To reach the highway again, he'd have to get past the searchers on that road. The way to get past them was to circle the point by water.

He stripped to his shorts, placed his clothes in the suitcase which he secured as tightly as he could, and carried it with him into the water, ignoring the chill, and began swimming with one arm, slowly and methodically aiming his way past the lights on the point. Sirens joined the dancing lights. He thought a boat would be handy, and a distant laugh echoed somewhere in himself and seemed to make the water warmer. A boat'd sure be funny, but I don't need it, did twelve lengths, my brother saw it, who's on the red bench right now, Harry'll be surprised to see me, wonder if he went to the morgue to— More sirens, like firemen. They figure the cab driver saw the three guys they're after, wonder who they are. His arm got tired and he had to tread water. The shore was still too close, or seemed to be, and he'd have to go faster. By pushing the suitcase in front of him, he managed to loosen one of the

straps, re-tie it at the first hole, and sling it over his arm. It was easier now. But his mind didn't see his fatigue.

It still didn't see it when he was hardly moving. Things were so swift and simple, all the barriers were disappearing, inside, and even the night was less dark. At some high peak in his soul, he giggled: he was sure he was going to make it; he'd be home soon, and he'd start the playback the right way. The music came in louder, it sounded like fun, and the friendly water almost whispered to him—more giggles—as it drained away his strain. The swimming grew easier and easier, and he closed his eyes to hear better. There's nothing to hear! Keep your head up, up. Alright, alright, don't get all upset, I'm doing it. He was dreaming he was swimming now, in pace with the wind in his soaring brain, reaching out in strokes that pushed him a mile, stretching more and more, far into the comforting wetness, back into something as familiar as an ancient dream—the effort opened the way, and they were laughing together, the boat was no bloody good, Milt, he sank the goddam thing, can I stay, stay, now that——?

28.

"Guess he tried to make it back. He was in shallow water when I spotted him."

The big constable was speaking to Simon. His pants and most of his shirt were still dripping, and he kept indicating the boy on the beach with grim puzzlement. Two powerboats were a little distance out, anchored, with their spotlights trained on the shore. One of the drivers had climbed

out, in shorts, and brought the big constable his pistol. He shook the water out of his holster and put it away. A police motorcycle was coming along the beach trying to push the people back. Nobody was speaking loud. Headlights were backing up around the bay.

"Why back?" said Simon.

"I first saw that suitcase out in the middle. The water's calm tonight."

"Yeah."

"I'm gonna try working on him."

"You know he's dead, he's been in there close to two hours."

"Shouldn't be," said the big constable.

A group of people arrived from the far side, Bert Prince among them, and a man quickly detached himself from them and went to the boy. He set about examining him. The crowd pressed in.

Simon went to the group. The hotel clerk had been brought along.

"That the boy from your hotel?"

"It's difficult to say. Perhaps. You know it's—"

"Yeah. Is it him?" said Prince.

"It could be. But I thought he was gone."

"You never said he was there."

Simon went to the suitcase he had examined—the cloth bag had yielded cut newspaper—and held up the hotel key.

"Had this in his pocket."

The clerk said nothing, he shrugged and shook his head.

"Will you give me some room please?" someone asked.

The crowd quickly made a path when they saw who he was and a red-faced priest emerged. "I heard the sirens,"

he said simply to the doctor who gave up his place to him without comment, "who is he?" But no one knew.

"I just don't get it," said Prince.

"He was in on it, from the first. That's the only way. Stop thinking of him as a boy and it makes sense."

Two civilians arrived by flashlight carrying a stretcher.

"We can't get the truck down here. We'll take him out in this."

They waited till the priest moved away. The crowd followed them, and the police had to make room. When they lifted him, a face said, "Has he got a bullet in his back?" and began a short laugh that was cut off by Simon's fist and Prince saying, "To hell with him, he's not worth it."

They followed the stretcher to the dirt road and decided to ride back with him.

5 : Epilogue

The priest had

to go slowly on the unpaved road; his bicycle bounced steadily and kept taking short skids on the gravel. He didn't quite know what he was looking for, but he was sure he was close to whatever it was. He had turned off the main highway some time ago, taking the road that followed the lake; his black workpants were dusty, and the black windbreaker was getting as warm as his stiff collar. The day was just getting hot now, a little after nine-thirty; he had said Mass, given the day's first two conferences to the nuns who were on retreat, and, after a late quick breakfast, had ridden off to retrace the boy's movements along the highway and on the lakeshore road. He had gone perhaps two miles on the dirt road, a long distance for a man on a bicycle, even longer for a boy on foot.

He hadn't slept well, or long, the night before; the police asked him to stay on, and he had listened to all they

knew about the boy. But they had been more interested in the bank robbery, and, finally, around three that morning they drove him home without asking any questions of him. He was tired now, not sleepy, his mind buzzing with a tenacious alertness and repeating last night's encounter with the boy. The idea that he might have to ride even further made him feel the weight of the boy's tragedy. He didn't have to carry it very far; in a short while, he saw the car in the ditch.

He dismounted and walked with the bicycle; carefully, he leaned it against the tilted fender and tire, and peered into the interior. He saw nothing like what he expected to see, only the keys in the ignition, and he felt relieved. He went round and looked closely at the headlights. They were on, feebly. He turned off the ignition, pressed in a switch marked "lights," and struggled out of the car. He left the bicycle where it was and walked up the semi-circular driveway.

The cottage door was open. Something, and another, scurried out into the grass as he approached; he didn't see what they were. He stopped in the doorway to listen for nothing, and closed the door after him.

There was no point, he decided, in trying to get rid of the flies and other insects, it would be like trying to get rid of death. He looked at Ritch's body, face up, discoloring, one blackish hand to his neck, his legs sprawled. It was clad in drawers. The woven mat under the shoulders had kept the blood from spreading, but it had gushed far into the room. Black traces, footsteps, the boy's, led dimly from the couch to the back door; beyond it the lake twinkled in the warming sunlight.

The priest whispered a formal prayer for the dead, "requiem aeternam dona ei —" but his mind seemed to chatter its own colloquy: he has paid for his love, Lord, have mercy on him, You know the worst about him, and that's a circumstance for forgiveness, it was that way when You were on earth—the police phrases darted into his thinking, the boy was to meet somebody, he was on the run, he was alone up here, they got to him, he must've been a little nuts, imagine a bank job, the clerk said he had no visitors.

"You were close to the boy." He spoke aloud, and the living sound almost frightened him. "You were the only one who could be."

It didn't make much difference, the flies buzzed quietly, a human voice was the least real thing in the room. He knew he'd have to tell the police, or someone else might be blamed for the killing; he didn't know why he hadn't told them last night: perhaps he hoped the boy had been imagining things, but now he felt it was inhuman to make criminal what was already a completed tragedy.

Near the other couch, he found a man's clothes, and with what he needed he began dressing Ritch to the waist; a vesting prayer, a habit of years, gird my loins, Lord, echoed by as he fastened the belt, leaving me strong in chastity. When he had finished, he looked around for a phone, but saw none. He didn't talk aloud any more, he only looked at Ritch and thought, whatever sort of love you had, may it help save you, even if it did destroy you. He left the cottage and went to the road.

He took his bicycle from the fender of the car and started riding back looking for the first telephone wire that would lead to a house. As he came to a curve, he heard the

heavy grind of an engine, its shattering exhaust, and saw the dust. A big yellow bus bounced and heaved towards him. He edged over to the side of the road and suddenly heard the jeering children, heads out of the windows trying to outshout the exhaust, "Hey, mister, your wheels are turning," and saw the boys' camp sign on the side of the bus. They were throwing paper cups and garbage from the windows. The bus kept going and passed on before he could tell the driver about the car in the ditch.

Past the curve, still hearing the bus, he followed the telephone line into a farm road, and had to walk up the slope to the house. When he reached it, he noticed that the morning had grown hot and that the noises from the bus had stopped.